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ROCKET STORIES

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AN EDITORIAL ON UP SHIP!

The rocket trails are already blazing across the sky, and their roaring can be heard in some sections of this country as a regular thing. Man is outward bound, to keep the long overdue rendezvous with the stars that have mocked and dared him on since he first huddled over his tiny fire at night and began trying to count them.

ROCKET STORIES begins this issue with the only logical name for an adventure magazine of the days to come. We aren't calling the magazine science fiction, for the same reason that stories of the old west were never called science or invention fiction. Colt, in inventing the revolver, made that west possible; and the men who are working on the rockets will make our future possible.

But it takes more than a laboratory to make the future. It is going to take men with hearts in them—and some of them seemingly without hearts. It's going to take strong men, built for new frontiers and for action. Those men aren't scientists. They'll use science, just as all of us do. But to them, it will be a life of adventure and the romance of far worlds, not a dispassionate quest for knowledge.

We want to capture some of that adventure. Some day soon, we'll be able to give adventure stories about the planets with the same factual background that is to be found today in a story of Africa. But we're impatient. We want to get a little ahead of the times. And as long as men are men, and the life in them will be strained to its fullest, we have background enough to predict much of what must come.

It won't matter too much what kind of planets we find when we go out to space in our ships. There'll be men who will make those planets habitable. It won't matter too much what kind of alien life we may find, or whether we do find it. If it's there, it will be strange to us at first, but we'll find under the strange exteriors the same basic emotions that life must always have. And if there are no bug-eyed monsters, it won't change things, because men will adapt and change with the new environments, and provide range enough.

When the songs of the rockets haunt the starlanes and the men come down from the sky to the brawling docks of Venus or the thin,

cold winds of worn and tired Mars, there'll be tales told to curl the hair of the planetlubber. They'll be rich tales, told with gusto, filled with romance, but never merely romantic.

And we're trying to bring you those same stories. If you're sophisticated, then you'll have to pardon us, and pass on quietly. We're not trying to be clever or cute, nor do we care whether the men breathe air on Mars by adapting to it or by cooking up some scientific gadget. We don't always care too much for the "new" idea that is new only because of some bit of scientific gobbledegook. The bum in the gutter on Europa will be just the same old story of a man who couldn't take it—but he won't be quite the same, because he'll have had to be really a man to get there first, and there will have to be some damned good reason for what's happened to him. It won't be sophisticated, probably—but if it makes a good yarn to stir the blood and set the old arteries to leaping, then we want it.

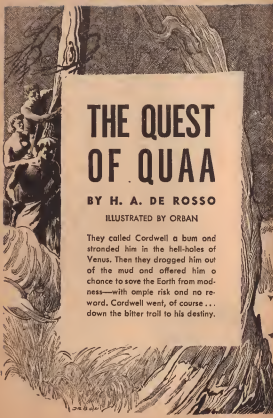
We're not ashamed to have emotions, and to use them. The men on those first rockets, exploring the worlds beyond us, won't be cold, logical beings. They'll be there because they could dream, with emotions as well as guts behind their dreaming. And like them, we'd rather be carry than to be dull, rather cry over the death of a friendly BEM than to sit down and try to see why its tibia didn't match its femur!

So up ship, and let's take off. Mars lies overhead with her red sands parching in the light of a feeble sun, and the ruins of her vanished glories showing as the fabled canals our astronomers see when they want to. Venus lies in a mist, hiding herself; but the coy wench has her own teasers, she sends out light that shows she has no water—and then laughs at us as we try to explain those clouds around her as anything except water.

And beyond lie the stars, where we no longer expect to find empty, planetless space. Science has done a full circle, and come back to the belief that there must be countless planets around the myriad suns. We can perhaps find millions of earth-like worlds out there.

Step inside, and move lively, now. We're blasting off on our first run. We're outward bound, with the rockets singing in our ears, and our next stop unknown, except where the ancient maps tell us "here lies adventure."

Welcome aboard on our maiden voyage!



THE QUEST OF QUAA

BY H. A. DE ROSSO

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

They called Cordwell a bum and stranded him in the hell-holes of Venus. Then they dragged him out of the mud and offered him a chance to save the Earth from madness—with ample risk and no reward. Cordwell went, of course . . . down the bitter trail to his destiny.



Cardwell dreamed of green fields and an open, clear sky. There were no clouds in this sky. The sun shone aching-bright and all along the horizon the sky was a beautiful blue. Wherever Cardwell looked the land was bright and distinct in his gaze. There was none of the incessant, humid mist of Venus.

But like all of Cardwell's dreams this one, too, ended.

He awoke with the familiar brown taste in his mouth and the softly throbbing pain behind his eyes and the first thing he saw, high above him, was the mist curling in through the glassless, barred window of his cell. He lay on his back on the bare stone cot, watching the tendrils of the mist creeping sinuously into the room and then fading into nothingness. Cardwell stared with red-rimmed, aching eyes a long while and then he began to curse Venus with a quiet, studied savagery.

First he cursed the planet in his Earth tongue, then in all the Venusian dialects he had thus far picked up. This occupied not a little time and when he was done Cardwell was quite exhausted. He tried relaxing on the hard stone of the cot and closing his eyes in an effort to recall what it was that had landed him in this Venusian prison again.

He remembered drinking but

that was all. He was quite positive that this time he had not brawled. There were no marks on his fists. He fingered his face and it was neither puffed up nor tender. He had just consumed a goodly portion of Venusian Buumal. That was all Cardwell remembered.

He could not sleep any more. His eyes pained fiercely if he kept them shut too long. His back was sore and numb from resting on the uncovered stone of the cot. Grunting angrily, Cardwell swung his legs off the cot and rose to his feet. He looked up at the mist crawling patiently and persistently through the window and Cardwell brandished a fist at the mist and had just begun to curse the planet all over again when the sound came from the door of his cell.

Cardwell whirled toward the noise, eyes narrowing, breath held tightly in him, then he let it out in a long sigh when he saw that it was just another Venusian jailor. They all looked alike to Cardwell. They all had the pasty, gray color that was the universal complexion of the peoples of Venus and long, black hair fanning down over their shoulders and the brightly colored loin cloths and the weighted clubs in their hands. This one, though at times he appeared to

be two to Cardwell, had opened the cell door and now he motioned to Cardwell to follow and started down the corridor.

They finally reached what Cardwell adjudged to be the top floor of the prison. The jailer indicated a door and told Cardwell to enter and, without waiting to see if Cardwell did so, the jailer started back down the way up which they had come.

Fighting back a chill of apprehension, Cardwell opened the door and entered. The room was severely furnished with only a gray steel desk, a gray steel table and four gray steel chairs. The walls were barren, only the blue stone of the structure showed, and the floor also was of uncovered blue stone.

Closing the door behind him, Cardwell became instantly aware of the odor of coffee. He could not remember the last time he had tasted any. The substance was unknown to the natives of Venus and what little was imported on the space-freighters for the Earthmen sold at prohibitive prices. The coffee pot bubbled softly on the ato-plate on the table.

"You look like you had a rough time," said the man at the desk.

Cardwell flushed. He knew he did not look like much. His whites were soiled to the extent

that it took a good deal of imagination to think of them in their original color. A two weeks' growth of tawny beard rimmed Cardwell's face. He had not washed in that time and dirt crusted his hands and his bared arms. He had no mirror but Cardwell supposed his face looked as forbidding as that of the hardest criminal in this prison.

By contrast, the man at the desk looked cool and neat and clean. His whites were freshly pressed. His black hair was neatly trimmed with a sprinkling of gray at the temples. His mustache looked distinguished. He had just shaved and there was still the good, sharp smell of after-shave lotion and talcum about him. It made Cardwell miserable with envy and he wondered that he had never quite lost his pride.

The man at the desk indicated the coffee pot. "Help yourself. It's not charity either. I just want you to have as clear a mind as possible under the circumstances. You'll need it for what I have to say to you."

Cardwell filled a cup and drank it down, not minding at all the scorching of his throat, knowing only the ecstasy of the good, almost-forgotten taste of it. Finally, he sighed with pleasure and opened his eyes again and

stared at the man behind the desk.

"Have another cup, Cardwell," said the man.

Cardwell stared thoughtfully at the fellow. "You sound like you're trying to bribe me for something," he said slowly.

"You could call it that," the man agreed, "although you'll have the alternative of rejecting what I have to offer. So you might as well have some more coffee."

Cardwell refilled his cup and took a sip of coffee and held it on the tip of his tongue a while before swallowing. He watched the man behind the desk narrowly.

"Who are you?" Cardwell asked suddenly.

The man took a wallet from his pocket and spread it on the table along with a paper. "Here are my credentials," he said, sounding very brisk and impersonal now. "My name is Vincent Holt. I'm an Inspector for Inter-Planetary Intelligence."

Cardwell set the coffee cup down carefully on the table. "An IPI man," he murmured, eyeing the other cautiously. "I've done nothing for IPI to be interested in."

"It isn't what you've done that IPI is interested in," said Holt, "but rather what you could do for us, if you're agreeable."

"I don't get you," Cardwell told him.

Holt sighed. "I'll admit it's time I came to the point." He speared Cardwell again with that cold, considerate stare. "Have you ever heard of Quaa, Cardwell?"

"Quaa?"

"Yes. The Venusian poison. The poison that is tasteless and that can not be detected by any of the scientific means now known to man. The poison that does not kill but whose effect in a way is even worse than death. Have you ever heard of it, Cardwell?"

Cardwell shook his head.

"That's not surprising," admitted Holt. "It has been outlawed for so long and the penalty for its use is so severe that Venusians usually don't think or talk about it. Quaa, Cardwell, gets its name from the Elquaan, the primitive people that inhabit the Tinder Mountains. The Elquans practice sacrifices to their gods, though now they sacrifice the grisaan. However, at one time in the long past, they practiced human sacrifice and that is where Quaa originated. Quaa, you see, debilitates the brain, it renders a man an idiot, incapable of thinking, of knowing who he is or where he is or what is happening to him. An ideal condition for one about to be sacrificed

to the gods. Do you follow me, Cardwell?"

"It hasn't made sense to me yet," said Cardwell.

Holt sighed. "I'm just setting the background. I'm giving you all the facts so you'll realize what IPI is up against. Now, Cardwell, I'm going to take up the matter of Panaceum. Surely, you've heard of Panaceum? That is the only good thing Earth has got out of Venus. This wonder medicine that cures almost any illness, the answer to those diseases that plagued Earth for centuries. The drug is manufactured here on Venus under the strictest supervision and is then shipped to Earth but by some means or other Quaa has been getting into the Panaceum. Do you begin to understand, Cardwell?"

Cardwell stared at Holt with a new interest. Cardwell nodded.

Holt's lips pinched as if from tightly suppressed anger. His voice was gelid. "Put yourself in the shoes of a doctor on Earth, Cardwell. You have a patient sick with an incurable disease—incurable, that is, unless you use Panaceum. However, if you use Panaceum and it happens to contain Quaa, you will cure the disease but destroy the patient's mind. What would you do, Cardwell?"

Cardwell shook his head in be-

fuddlement. "I don't see what all this has to do with me," he said.

"I'm coming to that," said Holt stiffly. "Be patient, Cardwell. IPI has been working on this matter for some time. A meticulous check has been made on the laboratories here on Venus where the drug is manufactured and IPI has concluded that the Quaa can not possibly be put in the Panaceum there. So we have to investigate beyond the laboratories, to the source of the products used in the manufacture of Panaceum. That is where you come in, Cardwell."

Cardwell's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How?"

"Panaceum is manufactured out of a chemical found in a lichen growth from the Tindor Mountains, a growth called Naalem. Naalem grows in the territory of the Elquaan. A thorough investigation must be made to see if that is where the Quaa is in some manner injected in the lichen growth and from there transmitted to the Panaceum. Now I can't very well go because I am known as an IPI inspector. The job must be done undercover. That is why we would like you to go, Cardwell. You would hardly be suspected."

Cardwell grinned crookedly. "I don't think I'd be much good. I know nothing of science and

chemicals. I wouldn't know Quaa if it jumped up and kicked me in the teeth. I know rocket motors and a little space navigation but no other science. I wouldn't be much good to IPI on this job, Holt."

"Arrangements will be made so that you will recognize Quaa when it kicks you in the teeth," Holt said evenly. "I can't elaborate beyond that until I know whether you are with us. Security reasons, you know. Are you game for this, Cardwell?"

"Gameness has nothing to do with it," growled Cardwell, the angry ugliness returning to him. "I'm not interested. Not that I haven't the guts for it. I'm just not interested."

Holt stared hard at Cardwell. "You'll be paid, Cardwell."

"The pay I want you could never give me!"

Silence filled in. Holt shifted restlessly on his chair. He seemed very much absorbed in a study of the desk top. Finally, without looking up, he said, "It's this matter of not being able to return to Earth, isn't it, Cardwell?"

"That's right."

Holt sighed. He glanced up now and fixed Cardwell with a cool, direct though not unsympathetic stare. "The thing is done, Cardwell. It can't be remedied.

Why eat your heart out about it?"

The anger began growing in Cardwell. "You should talk!" he burst out. "You don't have the Space Sickness! You can return home any time you want!"

"That's true," conceded Holt, his lips pinching, his voice getting tighter. "But I'm not to blame for what happened to you. No one is to blame for that. You knew what you were in for, Cardwell. The Space Sickness had happened to others before you. The terrific acceleration needed to break away from the Earth and other planets is something the human body was not built to withstand without some help. A man could stand just so many accelerations and then he had to be grounded, no matter where he happened to be. Another acceleration would mean certain death. You knew all this when you first shipped out, Cardwell.

"Of course, you were only a youngster and you didn't worry about it. Maybe you even had an idea of quitting before the Sickness got you. But you kept shipping out and it got into your blood and you couldn't quit until you were forcibly grounded on Venus. It's regrettable, Cardwell, and I'm very sorry, but there's nothing can be done

about it any more, so why not make the best of it?"

Thinking about it, hearing it discussed like this, brought the full needling force of the frustration back to Cardwell. Sweat stained his forehead, anger twitched his lips.

"Why wasn't Thomol used on me?" he shouted, clenching his fists, taking a menacing step forward.

Holt sighed again. "Thomol just wasn't ready yet. Dr. Lorenz dedicated his life to finding a cure for Space Sickness and he came across Thomol injections just before his death. Sure, they knew about Thomol even before your last flight, Cardwell, but it was still in the experimental stages. They had to be sure before using it. After your last flight, it became the law about the use of Thomol and now there is no more Space Sickness. But you've got to forget that, Cardwell. It does you no good to brood about it."

"It's easy for you to talk about it," said Cardwell. "You can always go home again."

Holt rose now to his feet, trembling with suppressed wrath, eyes glaring with contempt. "I wouldn't bother with the likes of you, Cardwell, I wouldn't have anything to do with a bum like you if I could

go into the Tindor Mountains myself. I've never once asked a man to go anywhere I wouldn't go myself. But this job has to be done undercover, it has to be done by someone who would run the minimum risk of being suspected as an IPI agent. Where are those guts you were bragging about, Cardwell?"

Cardwell raised a fist and stepped ahead. "I'll show you where they are, Holt," he spat through his teeth. "I'll show you you can't talk to me like that!"

Holt dropped his right hand on the handle of the Evans pistol in the holster at his right side. "If you want to fight, Cardwell," he said jeeringly, "why don't you go into the territory of the El-quaan? You might find plenty of fighting there. Or are you strictly a grop shop gladiator?"

Holt's purpose suddenly became clear to Cardwell. He was merely being egged on, he was being insulted into accepting the job. Comprehending this, Cardwell became cautious again—and suspicious.

"Why did you pick me, Holt?" he asked quietly. "There are lots of other spacemen grounded on Venus. Why pick a worthless bum like me?"

Holt's face became earnest. "We didn't pick you at random, Cardwell. IPI secretly investigat-

ed every Earthman grounded on Venus. You were picked for several reasons. First, you're only thirty-five years old and still in good physical condition. You've been on Venus for five years and you know a good number of dialects and you also know how to get around the planet. For all your bitterness, IPI still believes you're halfway decent inside. All you have to do is stop feeling sorry for yourself, lay off the Buumal, get yourself something to do and you'll be as good as any man in the universe. Those are the reasons IPI picked you."

Cardwell stared narrowly, thoughtfully at Holt. "You told me at the beginning I had the alternative of refusing. Did you mean that, Holt?"

"Of course," said Holt. He made an exasperated, defeated gesture with his hands. "You've disappointed me, Cardwell. I was positive I could get you to agree to work with us but it looks like I was mistaken about you. Well, no hard feelings. I did my best."

"You give up too easily, Holt," said Cardwell.

Holt's head went up eagerly. Hope flared in his eyes. "You'll throw in with us?"

"Not yet. I want to know one more thing. How will I go about this job? Like I told you, I know nothing about Quaa or science or chemicals. I presume whoever

it is behind this Quaa business is a mighty smart boy. He could easily trick me."

Holt seemed to debate with himself whether to answer the query. His fingers drummed softly on the desk top while he stared speculatively at Cardwell. Finally Holt said, "A qualified chemist will accompany you, Cardwell. This chemist will be prepared to make certain tests and will handle all the technical details."

"I thought you said IPI didn't want one of their agents to go into the Tindor Mountains. I take it this chemist will be an IPI inspector?"

"That's right," said Holt. "However, this agent has never been to Venus before, which is the reason we want an experienced hand like you. Also, it is quite unlikely that this person will be suspected of having connections with IPI. You will go into the Tindors as a hunting party. You will go to hunt the grinaan. That ostensibly will be your business. This person, being new on Venus, has hired you as a guide. I can't reveal this person's identity until I know definitely that you are with us. Already I've told you more than I should have, Cardwell."

Cardwell drew a deep breath. He could not see where he owed Earth anything. He could no longer be a part of its life or its

people. He was doomed to spend the rest of his days on a rotten, mist-filled planet. Why should he trouble himself about anything that happened to Earth and its people? But he could not bring himself to refuse. Perhaps it was because he rather liked this slight, intense inspector from Inter-Planetary Intelligence.

"I'll go," said Cardwell.

Holt heaved a sigh of relief. His eyes warmed. "I'm glad, Cardwell, I'm glad," he said fervently.

Holt went to the door through which he had come and opened it and beckoned to someone. This one came into the room quietly and Cardwell felt the breath freeze for a moment in his throat while a vast shame for his appearance swept over him. He was so stunned that his mouth dropped open slightly in surprise.

Holt said, "Cardwell, I want you to meet the IPI agent you'll work with—Miss Ada Landers! . . ."

II

The Venusian city of Valmaa stood on the edge of the Ligor Sea. This sea was quite shallow and, like almost all the bodies of water on the planet, was more in the nature of a swamp than a clear, navigable stretch of

water. Large patches of thorny weeds littered the surface of the sea and only the small boats and dugouts of the Venusians traversed the Ligor Sea. Earthmen used jet airships to travel about the planet. It was in one of these planes that Cardwell and Ada Landers came to Valmaa.

North of Valmaa, away from the sea, the land began to rise, lifting into a series of rolling hills covered by a thick, stifling growth of brush and trees. Beyond the hills were the Tindor Mountains. It would take three days of travel on foot, Cardwell learned, to reach the edge of the mountains and an additional two days to reach the territory of the Elquaan where the griaan abounded.

On this day, Cardwell sat in the bar of the Hotel Venus, drinking Buumal. The Hotel Venus was the most modern building in Valmaa, constructed in a faithful reproduction of similar buildings on Earth, and, secretly, Cardwell cursed this resemblance.

But this was the present pattern on Venus. As more and more Earth people emigrated to the planet, they brought with them touches of the Earth they had left. Cardwell saw these touches in the jet airships and jet jeeps and the plush new structures like the Hotel Venus and

these were all poignant, aching reminders to Cardwell of the Earth he would never more see.

So Cardwell sat, staring down into the purple Buamal in his glass, listening sadly to the Earth music being played by the orchestra at the far end of the barroom. He heard the rustle of movement behind him and smelled the heady scent of perfume and then Ada Landers seated herself beside him.

He looked a little angrily at her. He could never stop admiring her striking loveliness. Perhaps it was because of this that he could never reconcile her as being an agent for IPI. She was rather tall and slim. Her hair was a golden blonde and her face was round and piquant and marked by a pair of lively hazel eyes. She was dressed all in white—a white hat and a loose white shirt that still could not conceal the fullness of her breasts and white trousers tucked into the tops of high white boots.

"I hired you to work not to drink," said Ada Landers stiffly, lighting a cigarette. "I don't mind your drinking but I'd like you to have a clear head in the morning, Cardwell. I don't want to have to dig you out of the gutter again. You look real nice now. Stay that way."

Cardwell had to concede that she was doing an excellent job of passing herself off as a haughty, strong-willed, wealthy heiress up on Venus to hunt the dangerous grinn. He had to admit this even though she got on his nerves with her ways. At times, he did not know if she was just pretending or if she actually were spoiled and selfish.

She had his Buamal now and she took a small sip and then made a very wry grimace. "It tastes awful, Cardwell," she exclaimed. "How can you drink this stuff?"

"I drink for the effect, not the taste," he growled. "Besides, I can't afford imported Earth liquor."

She glanced behind him, at the row of booths along the far wall. In the soft light, her face looked very appealing to Cardwell. He felt his throat constrict. He could not understand why.

"How are you with the native women, Cardwell?" she asked suddenly.

"I can take them or leave them alone."

"You have an admirer," she said, indicating a booth with a nod of her head. "Isn't she a doll, Cardwell?"

Cardwell looked that way and saw this Venusian woman sitting in a booth with a man. As Card-

well glanced at her, he received the impression that she had looked swiftly away. She gave no indication that she was aware of his study of her. She smiled slightly at her companion and went on talking to him in a soft, liquid Venusian dialect.

"An old flame of yours, Cardwell?" asked Ada Landers.

"I never saw her before." He stared narrowly at Ada. "What makes you think she's interested in me?"

"Watch the mirror. When she thinks you'll not notice, she sure looks you over. I can't blame her really. You are a handsome brute."

Cardwell could not get over the feeling that she was secretly laughing at him and he flushed angrily. "Oh, shut up," he growled. "I'm hired to help you hunt the griaan, not to listen to your smart cracks. Find someone else for that."

Ada Landers smiled a little and bowed her head and said in a barely audible voice, "She's at it again. See for yourself, Cardwell."

This time Cardwell clearly saw that Ada Landers was correct. The Venusian woman's attention was focused on him intently and unabashedly. Her companion, too, a heavy-set Venusian, was also interested in Cardwell. Suddenly, the two

Venusians became aware that Cardwell was studying their reflections in the bar mirror and the two hastily looked away.

Ada Landers said quietly, so that the Venusians could not hear, "I'll leave, Cardwell, so you can get acquainted with them."

"What makes you think I want to get acquainted with them?"

Ada Landers' lips thinned. "I think it might not be a bad idea. They're very interested in us. I'd like to know why."

She rose now to her feet and said more loudly, "I think I'll go and freshen up a bit, Cardwell. I'm sticky all over. I don't see how anyone can stand the humidity on this planet."

"You can stand it a little more," he growled. "You can always go home again."

She paused and looked at him. The archness, the secret amusement was gone from her eyes and she stared almost humbly at him. "I'm sorry for you, Cardwell," she said quietly, sincerely. "I wish I could do something to help."

"Forget it," he said gruffly. "I'm all right. Go on and freshen up. What you waiting for?"

When Ada Landers had gone, the two Venusians rose to their feet and approached Cardwell. He watched them come in the mirror, the girl deferentially following behind the man. He

was a broad-shouldered fellow, with a powerful chest and a shrewd superciliousness in his dark eyes. He wore his long black hair in a disheveled manner down about his shoulders in the style of all Venusian males. He wore a long white gown that brushed the floor but his arms were bare.

He stopped beside Cardwell and bowed, though the arrogance was still about him. "You are Ward Cardwell," he said.

Cardwell's eyes slitted as he looked the Venusian carefully up and down. "How do you know my name?" he asked quietly.

The Venusian kept his head bowed in apparent humility. "You have been on Venus for five years. Every Venusian of consequence knows who you are—and what you are."

"I presume then that you are a Venusian of consequence?"

The man drew himself up perceptibly. His head straightened and he looked Cardwell challengingly in the eyes. "I am Year, lord of a talega in the Tinder Mountains. This is my daughter, Naela."

Cardwell looked at the woman. Up close, she was even lovelier than the glimpses Cardwell had caught of her in the bar mirror. She returned his glance frankly. She made no effort to conceal her

interest in him and Cardwell felt his face begin to get warm. It was too obvious.

She had the gray pallor of all Venusians but on her it was attractive, going along as it did with large purple eyes and long, rich brows and a full, red mouth. She, too, wore a long, white gown that covered her from the throat to the ankles but the robe had slits in it here and there, now revealing, now concealing with every little movement that Naela made and she knew how to execute these movements with the finesse of a polished coquette.

Her black hair was done up in a ball on the very top of her head and she wore it much like a crown. She smiled suddenly at Cardwell, revealing even white teeth. "I am very pleased to know you, Cardwell," she said in a soft, throaty voice.

Cardwell turned his attention back to Year. "What do you want with me?" he asked bluntly.

Year frowned a little. "You are very rude, Cardwell."

"I can't help it. I was born that way. Well, what do you want?"

Year colored slightly. His eyes glittered with anger but his voice remained calm and suave. "I trust you will forgive us for being so forward. But it was brought to our attention that you



have outfitted for a hunting expedition into the territory of the Elquean. That journey coincides with the way to my telega and my daughter and I have been hoping that we might travel that way together."

"Why?"

The wrath suddenly glowered almost uncontrollably in the Venusian's eyes. He swallowed perceptibly and then put a check on his temper and his voice was quiet enough when he spoke. "The way is long and lonely and tedious. I had thought it would



help us all to pass the time on the journey exchanging a little chit-chat. I find talking with Earth people most enjoyable. I like to hear of Earth customs and the strange Earth conception of morality."

"I wouldn't be very interesting," said Cardwell. "I haven't been on Earth for awhile. In fact, ever since I was fourteen, I've spent very little time home. I knocked about space too much to spend any time on Earth."

"Then you know about strange planets and strange worlds!" exclaimed Ysar. "That is even better. Oh, I know we will enjoy chatting. Won't we, Naela?"

"Yes, my father," she said, and threw another dazzling smile at Cardwell. She made a swift movement with her body and Cardwell caught a fleeting glimpse of a smooth breast. "I am sure we would enjoy ourselves immensely, Cardwell."

He could feel the pulse begin to pound in his temple. His throat was suddenly dry. "I don't know if Miss Landers would approve," Cardwell said slowly. "I am just her employee. I have nothing to say about matters. Confidentially, Ysar, Miss Landers is a bit of a snob. I wouldn't be too hopeful of going along with us if I were you."

"Very true, Cardwell, very true!" a sharp voice said.

Ada Landers had come up so quietly that none of the three were aware of her until she spoke. She stood there haughtily, nostrils pinched a little in anger. "If you are done slumming with the natives, Cardwell," she said stiffly, "I'd like to put you to work. You are still working for me, aren't you? Come then!"

She turned on her heel and started away. Cardwell showed the palms of his hands to Ysar and his daughter and shrugged. Then, without a word, Cardwell started after the erect, swiftly-striding figure of Ada Landers. Behind him, Cardwell was conscious of Ysar's hard, wrathful stare but Cardwell never looked back.

Ada Landers did not speak until she and Cardwell were in her room. She waved a hand, indicating the mussed, rifled contents of the room.

"Somebody is interested in us, Cardwell," she said quietly.

The breath caught for an instant in Cardwell's throat. Up to now he had never considered the peril of the job. It had thus far been only something to occupy his mind, to take it off the poignant, irritating knowledge that he could never more return to his native Earth.

"Maybe it was only a thief," he said slowly. "Is anything missing? Have you checked?"

"Nothing. Everything was moved or touched except my chemical kit. That seems to have been most pointedly left alone."

Cardwell rubbed his chin. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything. Many bunters bring such kits along to test for minerals in the country they're hunting. You're not so wealthy that you couldn't stand another few million, are you, Miss Landers?"

She showed him a sudden, warm smile and chuckled softly. "I'll cut you in for twenty per cent of all the wealth I find. Is that satisfactory?"

"Very. You're most generous."

"Let's take a look at your room, Cardwell. Maybe you had a nosy visitor, too, while you were out."

They went to Cardwell's room. It, too, had been ransacked . . .

III

In what passed for dawn on Venus, Cardwell and Ada Landers left the city of Valmaa. The world changed from black to gray and that was the only difference between night and day on the planet. The thick, eternal mist forever hid the sun. On rare occasions the mist thinned out but never disappeared completely and at these times a sickly, sultry, yellow glow revealed the position of the

sun that never was seen from Venus.

The native guide, who was called Daanal, led the way. He professed to have been into the territory of the Elquaan and the Tindor Mountains several times and for this reason Cardwell had hired Daanal. The guide preceded the two elmus, the small, tusked, purple-furred beasts of burden that carried the equipment. Cardwell and Ada Landers followed behind on foot.

They left by a side street that took them down to the edge of the Ligor Sea, then turned sharply northward toward the rolling hills that seldom could be seen from Valmaa. At first, it was a wide road that they followed but it soon narrowed into a trail which they had to traverse in single file.

The damp, steaming growths of brush and trees reared on either side of the trail. They kept showering the travelers with large drops of water and Cardwell found it difficult to believe that it wasn't raining. But he had been through trails like these before and so he knew otherwise.

He watched Ada Landers as she strode along in front of him. He had not thought much about it before but now he began to wonder if she could endure the rigors of the long trip into the

mountains. This was no job on which to send a woman, he thought angrily for the first time. Silently, he began to curse Inspector Holt and IPI.

"Do you think we are being followed, Cardwell?" the girl asked quietly, her eyes suddenly very grave but not one bit frightened.

"I've had that feeling all morning," said Cardwell.

The girl went over to the nearest clump and took something out of a pack. Cardwell put on the Klausman glasses with their thick, twin lenses. He had heard of these glasses that allowed a man to penetrate both mist and the darkness of night, but this was the first time Cardwell had ever tried on a pair. He was astounded at the way the mist seemed to vanish and the distance that he could have seen had the trees and brush not been all around.

Ada Landers was staring back down the trail with her glasses. "They're not much help here, are they, Cardwell? About all they're good for is hunting the grinnan. There are too many turns in the trail to see if any one is following us unless they're right behind us and we don't need the glasses for that."

Cardwell nodded. "Still, we better keep them handy," he said quietly. "Don't worry, Ada.

Daanal tells me there are open spaces in the valleys between these hills. We'll camp there to-night . . ."

That afternoon the eerie, high-pitched whistling began in the brush and woods all about them. Most of the time the sounds were very faint but on occasions they seemed to emanate startlingly close.

He called a halt and went up to Daanal. "What is this, Daanal?"

The Venusian shrugged. "The people who live in these hills are communicating with each other. They speak to each other with the reed of the alrac tree."

"What are they saying?" asked Cardwell.

Daanal shrugged.

"I do not know. I recognize only the sound and not the message."

The trail kept dropping and soon the brush began to thin out, the trees no longer grew and then the trail widened into a road again, winding among waist-high grasses. Through the Klausman lenses, Cardwell saw that they had reached a wide clearing. He ordered Daanal to stop and pitch camp. The grayness was getting thicker, darker. Soon it would be night.

The whistling seemed to have stopped now that they were

halted for the night. Strangely enough, the silence seemed more frightening and ominous than the eerie wailing. The mist thickened and swept in billowing, swirling clouds across the clearing and Cardwell was thankful for the Klausmans that allowed him to penetrate the mist and the dark. He had a chill feeling that he would need them very much before this night was out.

The aborigines were not long in striking. First there was a small meaning sound far out in the darkness but it was a sound emanating from human throats and not countless reeds. The Klausmans allowed Cardwell to see through the shadows and darkness but not through the tall grass. It was evidently in this that the aborigines were approaching. He could see the tops shudder and move as if things were crawling through them.

Cardwell reached out and patted one of the girl's hands. It was cold but there was not the hint of a tremble in it. They were back to back, Evans rifles grasped in their hands, Evans pistols on the ground beside them. Daanal cowered among the elmus to one side but Cardwell could not shake the impression that the Venusian only pretended to be frightened.

Though they crouched in the

thick misty darkness, Cardwell realized it was not much of a shield. He had heard it claimed that certain aborigines on the planet could see as well in the dark as in the misty daylight. It was a known fact that all Venusians were bothered very little by the eternal fog. They seemed to be born with some special faculty that enabled them to see great distances through the mist that at times almost blinded Earth people.

"You take your side of the clearing, Ada," Cardwell said quietly, "and I'll take this side." He hesitated, then said, "We'll be all right. Our Evanses should be more than a match for them. They're probably armed only with knives."

"I'm not scared if that's what you're thinking," came the girl's even voice. "I volunteered for this, Cardwell. I knew all along I wasn't going to the junior prom."

Cardwell grinned a little. "You'll do, Ada."

The moaning came again, swelling this time into a great mourning dirge that still carried with it a primal, bestial lust and savagery. This was the aborigines' war cry and at the wailing height of it they suddenly erupted upright out of the tall grass, long knives brandished, and then came hurtling forward.

Cardwell said, "Now, Ada," through his teeth, and depressed the trigger of his rifle. The weapon hissed raucously and a blue bolt hurtled out of the barrel and caught one of the primitives and lifted him bodily, screaming and thrashing, and then flung him down out of sight in the tall grasses.

Breath caught tight in his chest, every nerve taut, Cardwell kept the long Evans working. Another bolt from the weapon blasted the head off another aborigine, another primitive went down screaming with a gaping hole burned through his belly. Krohnite fumes rose from the hard-working Evans, almost gagging Cardwell with their pungency. Behind him, Cardwell could hear the steady snarled hissing of Ada's Evans and the screams of the aborigines she was bowling over mingled with those collapsing before Cardwell's weapon.

Suddenly, when the shrieks were at an ear-splitting crescendo and the stench of burnt flesh and Krohnite fumes were almost unbearable, the primitives broke. A moaning command swept down their shattered lines and then they turned and began fleeing toward the shelter of the trees. It was then that Cardwell became aware of the other two weapons flashing up where the

trail emerged out of the woods. It was this, Cardwell figured, rather than his and Ada's decimation of the aborigines' ranks that had sent them racing in panicked flight.

The girl, too, had noticed these flashes and she put a hand on Cardwell's sleeve. "What do you make of it?" she asked in a strained voice.

Now all was quiet except for a few moans of the dying primitives. The flashes up at the edge of the woods ceased and Cardwell, peering narrowly through the Klausmans, said:

"They're starting toward us. We'll know in a minute who they are but we won't take chances. Keep your Evans ready, Ada."

There were two of them approaching the camp, crossing the clearing with their Evans rifles held at arm's length above their heads, signalling friendship. The breath caught in Cardwell's throat as he recognized them.

The two were Year and his daughter, Naela . . .

IV

Under the circumstances, Cardwell and Ada Landers could not refuse Year and Naela permission to accompany them, although neither Cardwell nor Ada liked the idea very much. They would have preferred going on

by themselves since they could not bring themselves to completely trust the Venusian and his daughter. But Cardwell and Ada could not deny that the two Venusians had done them a valuable favor in helping to drive off the aborigines and so they reluctantly agreed to having Ysar and Naela with them.

The next two days passed without incident and on the evening of the third day after they had left Valmaa, the travelers found themselves at the foot of the Tindor Mountains. As they pitched camp that night, Ysar announced that in the morning he and his daughter would take another way to reach their home in the mountains. Cardwell received this information with a great amount of relief.

Not that the trip had been unpleasant, Cardwell thought. Ysar had proved to be very affable and his stories of the planet and its history had been most entertaining. Naela's attentions had been directed boldly and unabashedly at Cardwell and he was finding them more difficult to resist all along. Naela was just about the most attractive woman Cardwell had seen on Venus or any other planet.

This evening, after they had eaten, Naela snuggled up close to Cardwell and turned her big, purple eyes on him. "I will miss

you, Cardwell," she said sadly. "I will think of you often on our lonely talega."

Cardwell had to exert a concerted effort to keep from putting his arms around her. His throat constricted. "Don't you have any handsome Venusians to help you pass the time on your talega?" he asked lightly.

"I do not consider Venusians handsome," said Naela, pouting a little. "Besides, there are no young men on our talega, none that are worthy of me. Why don't you come and stay with us, Cardwell?"

She snuggled closer, very warm against him now, and he could feel the animal desire begin to rise in him. "You forget that I am employed by Miss Landers. I must go where she commands."

Naela's eyes narrowed a little as she stared up at him. "But you will not be employed by her forever, will you? After you are done working for her, then you will come to our talega, won't you? It should not take long to hunt the griann. With the Evans rifles you should experience no difficulty in killing several of the beasts quickly. Then you will be finished, will you not?"

An innate caution stirred in Cardwell. "I suppose so."

"What do you mean—you sup-

pose so? Do you have other matters besides hunting?"

Cardwell stared narrowly at Naela. It was this that disturbed him, this that aroused the distrust in him, this constant harping on whether he would be through with his job once several griaan were taken.

"What other matters could I have?" he said carefully.

"Then you will be through after you have killed a few griaan. Then you will come to our talega!"

Cardwell smiled slightly. "Not so fast. I must accompany Miss Landers back to Valman. My job does not finish until I have taken her back to the city. That was in our agreement."

"But then you will be through," Naela persisted. "Then you will come to our talega, will you not?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't you like me, Cardwell?" she asked throatily, pressing still closer to him. "After all, my father and I saved you from those primitives. Are you not grateful?"

Naela's face was lifted, her mouth was enticingly close to Cardwell's, he could feel the urge start overwhelmingly in him. Then he sensed the eyes watching him and he abruptly pulled his head back just as his lips

began to brush the girl's.

Ada Landers stood in the entrance of her tent, watching Cardwell and Naela. There was an amused smile on Ada's face. "What a paragon of self-restraint you are, Cardwell," said Ada, unable to hide the mirth in her voice.

"Oh, dry up," said Cardwell.

Naela was looking, too, at Ada but the Venusian girl made no attempt to pull away from Cardwell. Ada Landers came ahead, still smiling slightly.

"You don't mind if I watch, do you, doll?" she asked Naela. "I am always anxious to pick up a few pointers on how to attract the opposite sex. Perhaps I've been too subtle in my attempts. You're teaching me things, doll."

Naela glowered at Ada but said nothing. Ada arched her brows as she looked at the revealing rents in Naela's gown. "Do you have a spare robe with you, doll? Maybe if I was dressed in one of those, Cardwell would find me attractive, too."

"Cut it out, Ada," growled Cardwell, feeling very uncomfortable now with Naela so warm and tight against him and Ada amusedly watching his discomfiture. He began to gently push Naela from him. The Venusian girl got the hint and abruptly jumped to her feet. She glared at Ada and made as if to speak,

then checked herself. She turned and smiled provocatively down at Cardwell.

"If you were at our talem, Cardwell, there would be none of these unpleasant interruptions," she said softly. "Remember that, won't you?"

With that, Naela walked away to the other side of the camp where Year sat, impassively watching them. Ada chuckled. "Poor Cardwell," she murmured teasingly, then she turned to see Year approaching them.

Year stared somewhat intently at Ada for a moment, then turned his glance on Cardwell and smiled affably again. "I take it that like all Earth people you regard us as a backward planet?"

"I can't see what else you'd call yourself, Year. Why, your planet did not even know the invention of the wheel until Earth came. True, you've built some great cities and some wonderful, immense buildings even without the wheel to move the large stones. What else do you have to show?"

"I see that you, like all Earth people, are strictly materialistic, Cardwell," said Year, smiling somewhat arrogantly. "You can not conceive of anything possessing value unless it has substance. We Venusian scientists, and there are many of us, scorn the material things. We deal

solely with the science of the mind."

Year leaned forward, face suffused with some secret compulsion. "You Earth people understand things in terms of conquest, do you not? All right, Cardwell. Let's say that you have some highly advanced machine, some terrible weapon which is the result of years of scientific research. You turn that machine or weapon on me. I have nothing to defend myself but my bare hands and my mind. But if I could somehow control your mind, if I could render it useless and helpless, then what good would your machine or weapon be to you, Cardwell? Who would triumph, you or I?"

The ugly implications of it began to stir darkly in Cardwell. If true, it was somewhat monstrous and terrifying but Cardwell could not bring himself to believe that Year was serious about it. "The whole thing is fantastic, Year," Cardwell said slowly. "How could you or any other individual or any combination of individuals hope to control an unlimited number of minds? Perhaps you could control one or a few but remember this, I would not be the only one with a machine or a weapon. There would be countless others. You could not control all their minds at the same time."

Ysar's eyes narrowed. A note of menace entered his voice. "You do not believe, perhaps, that I can control even one mind?"

Cardwell said carefully, "I see that you and your daughter carry Evans rifles. Instead of using them on the aborigines, why didn't you drive them off with your mind?"

A swift, dark wrath diffused the Venusian's face. "You mock, Earthling," he burst out in sudden, unchecked anger. "Beware that you do not mock once too often!"

V

A feeling of vast relief came over Cardwell the next morning as he and Ada Landers and Daanal proceeded without Ysar and Nacla. Cardwell supposed that he owed something to the two Venusians for their aid in the fight with the Aborigines but Cardwell well began to feel more and more that the incident had been deliberately instigated. True, a number of the primitives had been killed which tended to arouse some doubts that Ysar had planned the attack and the subsequent rescue. But Cardwell knew how little human life was regarded on Venus and so he began to suspect strongly that Ysar had perpetrated the whole matter as a trick and excuse to

join Cardwell and Ada and, thus, perhaps, learn if there was more to their journey into the mountains than hunting the griaan.

As they began to advance on higher ground, Cardwell found that the mist was not so thick any more nor did it hug the ground so closely. It had lifted and seemed to hang suspended from ten to fifteen feet overhead, a gray, threatening expanse of impenetrable cloud.

All that day they encountered not a sign a life, either human or animal. What land they could see extended precipitous and desolate and barren. A few short shrubs grew in scattered, lonely isolation and, at times, they saw a lavender lichen growth clinging to the gray-green rocks.

Cardwell noted Ada's interest in this growth. Once, when they had halted to rest, Cardwell asked Daanal, "What is that growth called?"

"Naalem."

"Naalem? Is it good for anything?"

Daanal shrugged. "I do not know."

"You don't know anything, do you, Daanal?" asked Cardwell, his voice thinning. "You didn't even know that those aborigines were going to attack us, did you?"

Daanal hung his head. "I am only a guide," he muttered. "I

know only the way into and out of these mountains."

"All right," said Cardwell. "But remember this, Daanal. I have not forgotten that attack by the primitives. Don't let another thing like that happen or you'll pay for it! Now get on with you!"

Daanal picked up the ropes that led the elms and started onward. Cardwell glanced questioningly at Ada. She said softly so that Daanal could not hear, "That's the lichen, all right, but it's much smaller and scraggly than the one used for Panaceum. Still it looks like we're on the right track."

It was late in the afternoon that they spied the man. He was a dim figure far ahead of them and instantly Cardwell whipped on the Klausmans, aware that Ada was doing the same. The man appeared to be kneeling on the ground. He was building small mounds of earth with his hands.

He was clothed only in a loin cloth and he had the sickly gray skin and long, disheveled black hair of the Venusians. He seemed unaware of the approach of the others. He knelt on the ground and with his hands piled dirt with child-like, innocent preoccupation.

Daanal steered a wide berth

around the kneeling man and Cardwell had to shout twice, angrily, before Daanal halted. The guide was visibly frightened. Cardwell was tempted to ask the guide the reason for his fright but expected the same old evasive answer. So Cardwell held his peace.

He stopped and stared at the kneeling man. Ada Landers had come up and she, too, stared down at the Venusian who went on placidly building his tiny mounds of earth. There was something eerie and ugly ominous in the Venusian's stolid, childish engrossment.

Cardwell glanced at Ada. Her face was very grave and the muscles about her mouth were stiff with strain. A haunted, compassionate look lived in her eyes.

Cardwell turned his attention back to the Venusian. The kneeling man had thus far given no indication that he was aware of the presence of any one. He finished another round cone, patted it fastidiously into shape, gurgled happily and started on another pile.

"You," said Cardwell. "What are you doing?"

The Venusian went right on building another tiny mound. He said nothing. He did not even appear to have heard Cardwell.

"I asked you what you're doing?" said Cardwell, louder.

The Venusian scratched at the earth to loosen it and then drew it together and with the palms of his hands fashioned it into a tiny cone. He began patting it to make it retain its shape. He burred with pleasure.

Cardwell reached down and grabbed the Venusian's hair and roughly jerked the man's head back so that his face looked up at Cardwell.

"Answer me," growled Cardwell. "Why are you doing this?"

There was an unnerving vacuity in the Venusian's eyes. His mouth spread in a wide, amiable smile. He made soft, happy sounds in his throat. The vile import of it began to dawn on Cardwell and he was about to speak to Ada when the shout came from off to the left:

"Get away from that fellow!"

Cardwell looked up, startled. He still held on to the Venusian's hair. The voice shouted again, "Let go the man and stand back. Quick now!"

Cardwell saw him then. This man must have come out of a ravine whose gaping mouth showed in the distance. The man was about fifty feet away and he had an Evans rifle at his shoulder. The weapon was pointed at Cardwell.

Cardwell stepped back. He saw the aim of the Evans shift and

lower slightly and as the intent became abruptly apparent to him he started to cry out but it was too late. A blue bolt shot out of the Evans and there was the sudden sickening odor of scorched flesh and the kneeling Venusian toppled over on his side without a sound.

Cardwell's knuckles were white from the force of his grip on the Evans pistol at his side. But the Evans rifle was once again pointing at him. Slowly, reluctantly, Cardwell released his grip and held his hands away from his sides. The man with the rifle began walking toward them.

This newcomer was tall with wide shoulders and a hard, darkly handsome face. There was a well-trimmed mustache above his mouth and a neatly-clipped goatee on his chin. With a start, Cardwell recognized him as a man from Earth.

The fellow lowered his rifle, holding it against his side, but the gaping muzzle still pointed at Cardwell. The fellow showed his teeth in a white smile and said:

"I just did you a big favor, bud."

"I don't call cold-blooded murder a favor!"

The man with the rifle laughed easily. "Relax. The name is Hastings, bud, Paul Hastings. I'm a trader in these mountains."

"The natives up here get that way once in a while," Hastings said smoothly. "Something snaps in their brain and they go amok. At times, they're docile and harmless, then suddenly they become ferocious killers." He nodded at the dead Venusian. "This one did in three of my boys and then escaped. I've been trailing him since early morning. I know he looked harmless to you, bud, but he could have attacked you at any instant."

Cardwell stared hard at Hastings. The man was too glib, too smooth to satisfy Cardwell. Cardwell knew that he could never bring himself to quite believe anything that Hastings might say. Still, Cardwell felt, this was as good a time as any to establish himself and Ada in the roles of griaan hunters.

"I'm Cardwell," he said. "This is Miss Landers. We're heading for the territory of the Elquaan to hunt the griaan."

"Oh?" said Hastings, pursing his lips. His eyes swept narrowly, appraisingly over the packs on the two elmus. Then he uttered his short, falsely-joyful laugh. "This is in the nature of a coincidence then. I do all my business with the Elquaan. I trade in Naalem."

Cardwell smiled politely. "I'm afraid that the only thing Miss Landers and I are interested in

is the griaan. Are there any hereabouts?"

"You'll undoubtedly catch a glimpse of some tomorrow but I wouldn't shoot at any if I were you, Cardwell. You had better contact the Elquaan and secure their permission first. They won't refuse permission but they like to be asked. After all, this is their territory and they like to be acknowledged its masters."

"Well, thanks for the tip, Hastings. Will we be able to reach the Elquaan village tomorrow?"

For the first time Hastings gave a good look at Ada. The glance was bold and frankly appraising and Ada colored a little under it. Hastings chuckled. "I'd like to go on with you, Cardwell. I really would. But my camp is way back there and I've got business to attend to. But you'll see me around at the village."

He chuckled again and started away. At the mouth of the ravine, he turned and waved once, then disappeared into the dark, yawning mouth.

Cardwell glanced at Ada. There was sweat above her mouth and on her forehead and she sighed with relief. She held Cardwell's eyes and said softly, so that Daamal might not hear:

"That Venusian that Hastings killed—. The poor fellow had been fed Quaa, Cardwell! . . ."

VI

The village of the Elquaan lay in a small valley in the mountains. The spot was about the most beautiful that Cardwell had seen on Venus and he had knocked around most of the planet. The mountainsides reared precipitous and "apparently unscalable on either side of the valley. The air was thin and cool and the perpetual mist hung far overhead, the highest Cardwell had ever seen it. The floor of the valley was lush and green and several quiet creeks flowed through the valley.

The village was situated on one side of the valley, at the foot of an immense peak whose tip was forever hidden in thick, impenetrable cloud. The village consisted of primitive thatched huts, circular in shape, with a conical roof in the center of which was cut a hole for the smoke from the fire to leave the hut.

The reception that Cardwell and Ada Landers received from the Elquaan ranged on the indifferent. Obviously, there had been other hunters from Earth here before and so Earthmen were no novelty to the Elquaan. Then, too, Hastings had claimed to do business with the tribe.

The Elquaan were rather small in stature, none that Cardwell saw appearing to be more than

five and a half feet in height. They had the ubiquitous gray skin and long black hair of all Venusians. But the Elquaan differed in their clothing. All the other Venusians that Cardwell had ever seen wore either plain white robes or garments fashioned out of brightly colored cloth. The Elquaan were dressed in the auburn skins taken from the griaan.

Cardwell and Ada were readily granted permission to hunt the griaan, that is, the auburn ones. The white griaan they were forbidden to molest. To the Elquaan, the white griaan were sacred.

Cardwell and Ada made plans to hunt the following morning and so informed Daanal. The guide had lost his passivity and sullenness. It was obvious that he was among friends. His breath reeked from much was-sailing and Cardwell thought wryly that he wasn't the only person on Venus who liked a nip now and then.

They pitched camp on the edge of the village with little help from Daanal. At the first opportunity he slipped away and Cardwell cursed a while, then let it pass.

They had just finished their meal that night when Paul Hastings emerged out of the darkness. There was a broad, amiable smile on his face and he had on

clean whites and smelled of coogne water and talcum. His moustache and goatee were fastidiously groomed and he gave the impression that he knew he was quite a striking and handsome figure.

"Hello, folks," he greeted Cardwell and Ada loudly. "I said I'd see you again at the village." He gave that keen and appraising look at Ada again. "Seeing you makes me homesick for the women of Earth again, honey. You're a sight for sore eyes, honey."

Ada colored, red spots of anger glowed on her cheeks, her nostrils quivered with rage. "You might be a ball of fire among your Venusian beauties, Hastings, with a line like that but with me you don't even fizz. Good night!"

With that, Ada Landers turned on her heel and stalked into her tent.

Hastings pulled a bottle from a hip pocket, winked at Cardwell and proffered it to him. "Imported stuff from Earth, Cardwell," said Hastings. "Real scotch. Go on and wet your throat. I've got plenty of this stuff at my camp."

Cardwell told himself he was going to take only one drink. He would not have taken even that if it wasn't that such a long time had elapsed since he had tasted

any good Earth liquor. So he took a deep swallow out of the bottle, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sighed with pleasure.

There was a strange glitter in Hastings' eyes. The smile on his mouth looked falsely amiable. "Go on, Cardwell," he urged. "Have some more scotch."

Cardwell drank deeply. As the liquor warmed his stomach, he began to feel better. Some of the depression and worry lifted from him.

"How come you can afford scotch, Hastings? Is there that much money in trading in Naalem?"

"Oh, I have other angles." Hastings peered closely at Cardwell. "Don't you have any other angles, Cardwell? You can't make much money as a hunting guide."

"I do all right."

Cardwell took another drink.

"You can keep the bottle," said Hastings. "I'll let you kill it. I've got plenty more at my camp."

Anger and resentment began to rise in Cardwell. "Is that all you've got at your camp for me?"

"For you?" asked Hastings, his head coming up. "I don't get you, bud."

"You get me all right," growled Cardwell. "You're trying to get me drunk."

A hurt look came over Hast-

ings' face. "You've got me all wrong, Cardwell. I just came to pass the time. I'm sick of these ignorant, stinking 'Elquaan. You're from Earth and I wanted to talk to one of my own kind. I'm not trying to get any one drunk."

"I say you're deliberately trying to get me drunk," snarled Cardwell, lunging to his feet, "and if you deny it, then you're a rotten, stinking, filthy liar, Hastings! You're trying to get me drunk so you can pump me!"

Hastings rose carefully to his feet. Once a spasm of rage rolled unchecked and naked across his features, then he showed a smile that was all face. "Take it easy, pal," he said soothingly. "I'm your friend. I'm from Earth. I just want to be sociable and pass the time. I just offered you a sociable drink. You don't have to kill the bottle now. Take a sip every day."

"You know damn well once I've started I can't stop," snarled Cardwell, quivering with wrath. "I'm not so tight yet that my mind has stopped working. Who told you about me, Hastings? Who sent you to get me drunk?"

"No one sent me, bud. I came of my own accord."

"You're a liar. You're a stinking coward. Anybody who'd shoot down a poor helpless native full of Quana is nothing but a dirty,

rotten, yellow-bellied coward!"

"Cardwell!"

The word cracked out like the snap of a lash. Cardwell tensed, turned and saw Ada Landers standing in the entrance of her tent. There was an Evans pistol in her hand. It was not pointing anywhere in particular but the girl's attitude plainly indicated that she was prepared to use the weapon if necessary.

"That will be enough, Cardwell," the girl went on, lips white and stiff. "I did not hire you to brawl." Her cold eyes fastened on Hastings. "I think you had better leave, Hastings," she said coolly. "You've caused enough damage for one night."

Hastings smiled and bowed. There was a look of smug satisfaction on his dark face. "I'll be seeing you, honey," he said. Then, with a careless wave of his hand, he was gone in the darkness.

Ada took Cardwell's arm and led him into her tent. She tried to take the bottle from him but he hung on to it all the more tightly. "You fool, Cardwell," she hissed so that only he could hear. "You miserable, drunken fool!"

Cardwell could feel the liquor whirling around in his skull. He kept experiencing intermittently exhilaration and an ugly rage.

"I'm all right," he growled, "I know what I'm doing."

"Put that bottle away, Cardwell."

"I can handle the stuff."

She gave him a long, slitted, speculative look, then she came close to him, smiling a little, close enough so that the scent of her perfume permeated through the liquor dullness in Cardwell's mind.

"I need you, Cardwell," she said huskily. "I'm depending on you. You won't let me down, will you?"

Her nearness now made Cardwell oblivious to all else. He became aware only of what he had been fighting more and more each successive day. He could not explain how it had happened to him. At first, he had thought of Ada as a haughty, irritable snob. He had actually disliked her then. But, gradually, the dislike and then the indifference faded and vanished. Now it was something entirely different, something deep and aching and constricting in his throat and deep in his chest.

He reached out and pulled her roughly against him and bruised his mouth down on hers. He felt her tense and go rigid against him and there was no warmth in her mouth, only a savage, distasteful repulsing of him. This

saddened him and also made him angry.

"It's me who needs you, Ada," he said huskily. "I've got to have something to grab on to, something to anchor myself to. I just keep drifting helplessly but if I had you I'd stop, Ada. I know I'd stop. You mean everything to me, Ada."

She read the sincerity in his face and something like regret crossed her face. "I'm sorry, Cardwell," she whispered. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have led you into it. Please believe me when I say I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," he cried, squeezing her arms until she winced. "Now you know how you stand with me. You know what you mean to me. Don't I mean anything to you?"

She averted her eyes. "I'm very fond of you, Cardwell."

"Fond? Is that all?"

"Yes, Cardwell."

A roiling ugliness began to stir deep in him. "Why?" he growled. "Because I'm a no-good space-bum?"

"Don't say that, Cardwell. You know it isn't because of that."

"But I am a no-good space-bum," he insisted angrily. "I'm a soak. I drink too much. I'm no damn good for anything."

"Please, Cardwell," she begged, her face strained. "There—there's someone else. Back on

Earth. We're to be married when I return. It's only him for me, Cardwell. It will always be only him for me. I wouldn't have told you this except that I want you to know why I feel this way. It's nothing against you, Cardwell."

"It is against me," he snarled, pushing her roughly from him. He grabbed his bottle and drank deeply. Some of the liquor spilled and trickled down his chin. He reeled a little. "I'm a rotten, lousy space-hum exiled on this stinking, filthy planet. You've got no use for the likes of me. That's how it is, isn't it? I've got nothing to give you, only a share in my exile. Nothing else. So you've got no use for me. You've—"

She put her hands over her ears while tears welled in her eyes and began to trickle down her cheeks. "Stop it, Cardwell, stop it."

He went on unheedingly, full in the grip of his drunken rage. "You've got no liking for me, only a fondness. That's what you said, isn't it? You're fond of me. Well, I'm not fond of you. I love you and that's the beginning of it and the end of it. I love you and nothing else on this stinking planet. I hate it. I hate the mist and the clouds. I hate the people. I hate the stinking air. I hate Earth. I hate everything on Earth and from Earth. I don't

give a damn about anything any more. You hear? That goes for your fancy job, too. You know where you can shove it. I'm done with it. I'm done with everything but getting stinking drunk again!"

"Oh, Cardwell, Cardwell," she moaned, "what have I done? I didn't mean to hurt you. I wouldn't hurt you for anything. Come to me, Cardwell. I'm sorry. Let me put you to bed. I'll look after you, Cardwell."

"Like hell you will!" he cried, wrenching away from her as she grabbed his sleeve. He brandished the bottle. "Don't you come near me, you hear? I'm killing this bottle and don't you dare stop me. You hear, Ada? . . ."

VII

To Cardwell, when he first saw a grisaan, the animal was an incongruity. In his eyes it seemed to be a weird cross of two of the animals of Earth—the deer and the bear. The grisaan's body was thick and hulking like that of the bear and it was covered by a coarse, heavy, auburn fur. But the head, especially the three-pronged antlers, was on the order of a big buck.

Cardwell would have attributed the weirdness of the animal's

appearance to an aftermath of his drinking bout except that the griaa had been described to him back in the city of Valmaa. So he knew it was not a deceptive trick of his eyes as he stood on the edge of this mountain meadow and watched several griaa grazing.

His head still throbbed faintly but the intense, pounding agony of early that morning was gone. The cool, bitter air and the long hike to this hidden meadow in the mountains had helped to clear his mind but the needling recriminations and the regret and shame for his words and actions of the previous night still remained in Cardwell.

He had hardly spoken with Ada Landers this morning. She had reflected the same coolness and distance in her approaches to him. Cardwell was inestimably sorry for what had been done but nevertheless the truth lived achingly in him. He loved her. Had he not been angry and drunk, he never would have informed her. But whether she knew it or not, it made no difference to Cardwell. He loved her poignantly and hopelessly.

Danaal and two of the Elquaan who had been hired for the hunt had worked around to the other side of the meadow with the purpose of frightening the griaa into a stampede. By now

they should be directly across from the spot where Cardwell and Ada stood at the edge of the meadow. The griaa were wary and suspicious and to approach them in the open would be impossible. The range was too great for accuracy so it had been decided to stampede the animals and Ada would try to drop one of them on the dead run.

Cardwell said, "I'll go on ahead a little ways to turn them in toward you should they try to break into the trees in that direction. You should be able to get a good shot at their flanks as they pass." He eyed her narrowly. "Be careful. They don't have very good eyesight but once they spot something on the ground they charge it. Those antlers are wicked."

Her lips were pale. Cardwell did not know if it was because of the hunt or him. "I'm all right," she said stiffly. "I can handle an Evans. You know that if you'll remember the aborigines."

He wanted to say more but could not bring himself to do so. Without further word, he walked off, skirting the edge of the trees that rimmed the meadow. He had just reached his position when Danaal and the Elquaan went into action.

There sounded the shrill screeching of a reed, then a

couple of drums began to pound. Instantly, the heads of the griaan flung up. For a moment the beasts stood there in frozen startledness. Then a harsh blast of alarm and terror roared out of the throats of the griaan. Their massive heads ducked down, the antlers pointing sharp and straight ahead to clear their path, and the griaan bolted.

They tore across the meadow at a ground-shaking run, the thunder of their flight marked by shrill blasts of rage and fright. There was a precipitous cliff along the far side of the meadow and most of the griaan raced along in the lee of this bluff. However, two of the animals broke away from the others and started thundering across the meadow at Cardwell's position.

He raised the Evans rifle. Through the Klausmans, he took aim at the ground in front of the streaking griaan and began to fire. The fuming bolts kicked up huge clods of turf and flung them into the griaans' eyes. The beasts snorted, blasted an alarm, and pulled up sharply. Cardwell shifted the Evans and fired two bolts behind the animals and abruptly the two griaan wheeled and began to bear down on Ada's position.

When the griaan had stampered, the girl had come out

into the meadow several steps to get a better shot. Now the two griaan spotted her and they blasted a cry of primal rage and bore down on her with antlers lowered.

The girl evidenced no fright. Cardwell marvelled as she dropped down on one knee and aimed the Evans at the onrushing, bellowing beasts. She pointed the Evans and nothing happened. Sudden fear clogged Cardwell's throat.

"Shoot, Ada, shoot!" he shouted hoarsely.

Still the girl did not fire. Cardwell saw the rifle waver, then the girl frantically cast it from her and grabbed for the Evans pistol in the holster at her side. She threw up the pistol, aimed it—but did not fire.

A horrible implication filled Cardwell but he did not have the time to follow it through to its ugly conclusion. The range was great but he had to take the chance. The two thundering griaan were almost on the girl. A shriek tore out of her throat.

Cardwell's lips were compressed tightly as he sighted down the long barrel of the Evans. A prayer throbbed in his heart. He fired and one of the griaan blasted a scream of mortal agony and went hurtling head over heels. Cardwell shifted his aim to the other charging beast.

The first bolt missed. The second took the griaan high on the rump and hurtled the beast sideways but with a furious bellow of bestial rage the griaan recovered and started again for the girl. She broke into a run but she could never outdistance the griaan even if the animal were wounded.

Cardwell fired again. This bolt took the griaan in the flank and erupted a shriek of agony out of the beast. Its gallop broke, its speed slowed but it did not stop. The griaan still bore down on Ada with sufficient speed to overtake her. Cardwell fired once more. A mortal roar tore out of the animal. It went down on its knees as it reached Ada. A swing of the monstrous head and the antlers sent the girl sprawling. The griaan struggled to regain its feet but life suddenly and abruptly fled and the beast lay unmoving on its side.

His heart a blob of ice, Cardwell raced toward the fallen girl. A glad cry broke from him as he saw her stir and then, sit up, shaking her head, as he approached her. Her face was drawn with strain, a dismal fear still lurked in the depths of her eyes. She pushed him away as he dropped to his knees beside her and the act hurt Cardwell immeasurably. But he was grateful that she appeared unharmed.

"I'm all right," she said. "Thanks, Cardwell."

"What happened? Why didn't you shoot?"

Ada's lips were a thin, white line. "I pulled the trigger but nothing happened. It was the same with the rifle and the pistol."

That dark, chilling implication hit Cardwell again and this time he did not have to think very hard to understand how it was. He remembered running off at the mouth the night before. He remembered his slip about Quaa. Now it all added up.

Feeling miserable and guilty, he walked over to where Ada had thrown the Evans rifle. Cardwell picked up the weapon and examined it carefully. With a pocket knife he removed the master screw and slipped out the ammo chamber. The Krohnite had been neutralized, making the weapon useless.

He became conscious that Ada was standing beside him. "It's all my fault," said Cardwell, wretchedly. "I got drunk and talked too much and then somebody sneaked in last night and tampered with your guns. I'm just a no-good, rotten—"

"Stop it, Cardwell," Ada said sharply. "The harm has been done. Recriminations won't help. At least, we know one thing now—Hastings must be in the

gang involved with Quaa. First there was the native that Hastings killed. Then last night he heard your slip about Quaa." She smiled suddenly, brightly and some of the sting went out of Cardwell. "Cheer up, Cardwell. We're making progress. Only from now we'll have to be doubly careful..."

VIII

Early the next morning, there was a bustle of activity in the village of the Elquaan. Cardwell inquired of Daanal as to the reason for this and Daanal informed him that this was the day the sacred white griaan was to be sacrificed.

Cardwell and Ada proceeded with their preparations for another hunting foray. The day before they had passed by the steep cliffs and ledges where the Naalem was cultivated and it was their intention to keep passing by the place for several days, hoping thus to allay suspicion, and then to secure several samples of the Naalem for examination and testing. They knew that Quaa was undetectable but still they hoped to find evidences that the Naalem had been tampered with.

Cardwell and Ada were getting ready to leave their camp when they saw the two persons

approaching. A chill of apprehension struck Cardwell as he recognized the two. Despite their robes of white griaan fur, they were instantly recognizable to Cardwell.

The two were Ysar and Naela.

Ysar bowed and said, "Welcome to my talega, Cardwell. You, too, Miss Landers."

Naela grinned mischievously at Cardwell. "I see you availed yourself of my invitation, Cardwell. I trust we shall have many pleasant moments together."

The shock of this information still lived dully in Cardwell. "Is this your holding?" he asked, waving an arm. "Is this valley of the Elquaan your talega?"

"It is," said Ysar.

"But—but I do not understand?"

Ysar smiled broadly. "You mean you can not conceive of my daughter and I being of the Elquaan?" He drew himself up proudly. "That is true, Cardwell. I am of the Elquaan. I am their lord."

"The Elquaan are so primitive," said Cardwell. "You are very well educated, Ysar."

A vain smile touched Ysar's mouth. "It has been the custom for centuries for the lords of the Elquaan to send their families to the cities to be educated and to acquire knowledge, thus to

enable them to better rule their subjects." He looked narrowly at Cardwell and Ada and at their weapons. "You are going hunting today?"

"That's right," said Cardwell. "We got two griaan yesterday but in shooting them we ruined the heads for trophies. We hope to have better luck today."

"I was hoping you would stay for the festival and sacrifice of the sacred griaan today."

Ada smiled. "The griaan will be there tomorrow. We can hunt then. Thank you very much, Year, for your invitation. We shall certainly avail ourselves of it. It sounds like a lot of fun."

Year bowed. Cardwell could not get over the faint feeling of a leering mockery in the Venusian.

In the center of the village a stout cage had been built from small trees and in the cage was a white griaan. These albinos were rather numerous and were held in fearful, superstitious esteem by the Elquaan. The more plentiful auburn griaan were hunted by the Elquaan and their flesh used for sustenance and their hides for clothing and the sharpened antlers for the tips of spears.

It was toward the middle of the day that the actual ceremony

began, with Year acting as high priest.

Behind Year came Naela. She, too, walked with a haughty, mysterious mien, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Both Year and Naela were clothed in long robes of white griaan fur. On his head Year wore a pair of immense antlers much like a crown or an investment of authority.

In his right hand Year carried what Cardwell thought of as a baton. It seemed to be a round piece of wood about three feet long and two inches in diameter. The rod was covered with intricate carvings, tinted in brilliant hues, and studded here and there were twinkling, precious stones. As he came to a halt in front of the cage, Year lifted the baton.

A great hush fell over the crowd of Elquaan. The only sound was their quiet, spaced, intense breathing. In a loud, ringing voice, Year addressed the griaan in the cage.

"O thou precious and revered animal, be it known to all that we are about to sacrifice thee. My beloved people, come ye to the feast. Come ye and participate in the sending away of our noble and esteemed god. He is about to undertake the long and joyful journey to his ancestors.

(Continued on page 145)

WELCOME VOYAGERS

BY HUBERT J. BERNHARD

Klond and the strange ship of Martians came back from Procyon to Sol after countless generations, to bring Earth all the things it wanted. Earth wanted war—desperately, repeatedly, the missiles of hate spewed up—hate that came from fear and pain—and cancer!

The space-ship, which had hurdled the orbits of the outer planets at half the speed of light, moved quietly through the night ten miles above the Atlantic.

It first became visible to the world as a tiny pip on an Armed Forces radar screen, and for an instant the sergeant on duty mistook it for a vagrant meteor. Then, as it persisted, he checked its coordinates and gave the alarm.

The alert, trickling back through channels with fantastic speed, set off a chain of automatic reactions as it went. By the time it reached General Dale Brandenhurst, the jet engines of a squadron of supersonic fighter planes were flaming into life at

Maine Airbase No. 2, and other jets were belching fire at bases scattered over the full northeast quadrant.

Major Anthony Wolfe, whose duty it became to relay the news to the general in his quarters, coupled his report with the announcement:

"Operation Wide-Awake is in effect, sir."

The general nodded wearily as he drew himself to his feet. His eyes, reddened for want of sleep, stood out in contrast with his ashen skin and hollow cheeks, and he leaned against a small writing desk for support. Inoperable cancer had numbered his days and filled his nights with a steadily growing agony.



"Lend me your hand, Major," he asked. "Right now, I need someone to lean on."

In spite of his sickness, it was the first admission of weakness the general had ever been known to make aloud.

"Sir," Major Wolfe began. He paused to reconsider, then continued on the basis of long association. "Sir, this is another false alarm, I'm sure it is. Why don't you stay here and—"

"Our place, Major, is in the staff room. Help me to the elevators, please!" The words were stern, but the bloodshot eyes glistened momentarily in appreciation of the major's intention.

Without further demurrer, Major Wolfe stepped alongside the frail figure that commanded the northeastern defense quadrant of the United States Armed Forces. Together, they made their way to the lift that took them deep below the surface of Governors Island in New York harbor, to the staff headquarters where information was flowing from throughout the sector.

A huge map, occupying a full wall, showed the developing situation as the pair entered the room.

Planes were skyrocketing into the heavens and converging from throughout the northeast on the area threatened by the presence of the invader. Moving blips of

light showed that the first squadron, rearing through the sub-stratosphere, had come within visual contact range of the object. A television viewer was relaying the report from the lead ship as General Brandenhurst and his aide slipped into place at the staff table.

Nearing the target, the first fighter plane sparkled in the night with recognition signals that flickered on its wings and simultaneously crackled over Air Force radio bands.

A ring of luminescence rippled around the equator of the strange globe in reply, mimicking the pattern of signal lights on the plane. It was not the proper answer for friendly aircraft.

General Brandenhurst and Major Wolfe knew, as well as did the fighter pilot, that the presence of an unfriendly vessel had to mean that an attack from across the ocean had begun.

The squadron leader, acting in that belief, obeyed standing orders. His flight path curved up and over as he moved to intercept the giant spheroid. Eleven other planes zoomed after him, as though attached to an invisible ribbon streaming from his exhaust.

Like a flock of mosquitoes buzzing around a man's head, they came within range and one

after another loosed the deadly missiles that had been developed during the 25 years since World War II.

The first shell burst on the hull of the space ship, but the others never reached it. They exploded in mid-air, precisely as though they were smashing against an invisible barrier.

Then, so quickly that the whole encounter seemed hardly to have occurred, the spheroid was out of range. It was moving on a course that, as projected in the plotting rooms ten miles below, was aimed directly at New York City.

A hundred radar-eyed jets, miles apart, banked and pointed their arrowhead wings to intercept that course.

"Um!" General Brandenhurst, his forehead glistening like wax in the glow of the fluorescents, turned to Major Wolfe. "False alarm, did you say?"

"Not now, sir." The major was studying the huge electronic wall map which showed the movement of units. A battery of technicians on the other side of the command table kept in touch with forces throughout the quadrant. Flanking the general and himself were key operations, intelligence and supply officers.

The three television communications screens banked on the

table before the general, all of which had been focussed on the brief aerial encounter, went blank.

"No false alarm now, sir," the major repeated. He nodded toward the wall map, where a white line was extending in from the Atlantic and curving toward the City of New York. "At its present speed, it will be overhead in five minutes."

General Brandenhurst winced because of something deep inside. He held his breath for a moment, fighting it. He had lived this long; now that his judgment and training were needed, he would somehow last it out in spite of the agony burning in his liver.

"Civilian alert?" he gritted.

"Ever since the first warning, sir," reported a liaison officer. "Everyone should be in shelters by now."

"AA?"

"Our guided missiles should reach the ship in about a minute. Homing rockets have gone up from the entire metropolitan defense ring."

"To be detonated—?"

"Automatically, upon physical contact with the hull."

For a fleeting instant, the general thought how welcome a release death would be, and realized his time had come. Rigid for that instant, he relaxed suddenly

and ran a thin, veined hand through his gray hair.

"See," he said, turning slowly to a technician on the communications board, "see if you can get through to Washington."

Klord, who had brought the space ship and its teams of specialists over the light years from Proxima IV, studied the buildings of New York on the magniviewer in the control room. In spite of the visual blackout, details of the city were painted clearly on the screen by ultrahigh frequency radio reflections.

"Obviously," Klord observed by mental telepathy, "an advanced civilization."

Armo, second-in-command, snorted furiously. "Civilized savages!" he replied. "Let us leave this planet before our ship is damaged and we are marooned here."

"Their missiles cannot harm us," Klord reminded him patiently. He turned from the magniviewer and gazed soberly at his assistant. "The force screen, although designed for meteors, keeps the explosives at a distance. And we must learn more of these people—if people they are."

Armo, seated at the control panel, returned the look with equal sincerity. "You were always a man of purpose, friend

Klord," he said. "I can imagine nothing turning you aside. But think of Erna—your own wife!—in the maternity chamber awaiting your son. A sudden shock . . ."

"These may be of our own race," Klord shook his bronzed head. "When our people fled the dying Mars eons ago for an escape to the stars, they left a colony on this third planet."

"Yes," Armo glanced nervously at the indicators where sudden flashes of light against a dark background showed another series of missiles exploding against the force screen. "Yes," he repeated. "But the continent where they were established, safe from the monsters that roamed the rest of the world, is gone. Now, we find fiends who attack without provocation. We—"

His eyes, still flickering over the indicator, picked up a warning and interrupted his train of thought.

"Look!" he signalled. "It's something new, Klord!"

Instead of the intermittent flashes that showed objects blasting against the force screen, then disintegrating, the indicator gleamed with steady blobs of light. Both officers could interpret the significance of the images instantly. New missiles, approaching slowly, were surviving

the impact and were pressing inward in an attempt to contact the hull before exploding.

For a full moment, Klord and Armo studied the indicator. The missiles had homed on the plane of the space ship's equator and were being held about 10 yards from the hull by the anti-meteor force screen.

Even as the pair watched, however, one or two of the hlobs of light grew visibly larger.

"Can they reach us?" Armo asked.

"Yes. The screen is compressible. We can intensify the power and delay them for a while—but not indefinitely," Klord replied. "The screen is designed to stop fast-moving interstellar objects by turning them aside or bouncing them back into space. But these have come in slowly, and they must have some device that attracts them to the hull."

Klord was half explaining the situation, and half thinking. With part of his mind he was trying to analyse the factors involved, with another part he was fighting against panic.

Any high explosive, bursting against the hull, would jar the vessel, and a sudden shock might prove fatal for Erna, perhaps even now giving birth in the delivery room.

These inhabitants down below

—why did they attack? The space ship had answered their light signals; then, without warning, it had been subjected to a lethal barrage.

Repeatedly, its meteor screens had deflected or detonated at a safe distance smaller missiles than these, and it had made no hostile move in reply. Why, then, did they send these monstrous rockets against it now?

For a moment, he wanted to order flight, to escape into space where the ship could shake off the deadly charges in safety. Then the analytical half of his mind won out.

"These objects are centered around the equator," he observed. "They're standing opposite the lenses from which the beams of force fan out to surround the ship. There are no more arriving. Order the screen withdrawn from the rest of the ship and concentrated on the missiles attacking us!"

He watched the indicator as Armo, unquestioningly, transmitted the instructions. In a few seconds he was rewarded as the objects began to grow smaller, pushed away from the vessel by the concentration of power that normally shielded the entire hull.

"Get them out to a safe distance," he commanded. "When they are far enough, beam all power onto one missile for a mi-

crosssecond. Then cut back to the full equator."

Anxiously, the two Martians stared at the indicator as the blobs of light grew smaller and range-readings showed the rockets falling back.

The retreat was rapid, at first, then slower as the force beams, fanning out into space and wasting their energy, were able to concentrate less and less on the missiles. Finally, force and rockets reached a balance, and the dots of light remained almost stationary.

"Wait!" Klord ordered. "Are they far enough to detonate without harm?"

Armo glanced at the indicator. "It depends. It's safe enough for any chemical explosive. But if they contain nuclear charges . . . no!"

Like a chess master who understands his opponent's strategy, Klord smiled slowly.

"We are almost over their city. They would not send up weapons that would rain radioactivity over their dwellings. Go ahead!"

Armo gave the order and, for the barest instant, all the power output of the ship—and it was tremendous—was concentrated on a single rocket.

Like a battering ram of solid steel, traveling at the speed of light, the beam smashed into the warhead. As the fuses in the

missile signalled a "solid" contact, the rocket was hurled away and its blast was dissipated harmlessly along its path in a brilliant display of fireworks.

So briefly was the power turned from the other rockets that they had no time to approach the ship before it was restored. Then, one by one, the Martian marksmen picked them off with the beam.

General Brandenhurst was in communication with the President and the Divisional Chiefs of Staff in Washington when the homing rockets first reached their mark.

The radio-telescope which picked up the image of the space ship magnified it to the size of a golf ball by the time it was transmitted to the visi-plate on his desk, but the rockets were too small to be seen.

"We know by the radio impulses they are close to the ship," the general reported to the Capitol. "But they haven't made contact with the hull yet. When they do, they'll be detonated."

"Where is the aircraft now?" asked the Divisional Chief for Air.

"Altitude, ten miles, and practically directly above the city." General Brandenhurst scanned a message handed to him by an earphoned radio man.

"Our rockets are moving along with the object," he reported. "I can't understand why they don't make contact!"

In Washington, the President cracked his knuckles. "Neither can I. Intelligence has certainly folded up on us."

Behind the President, Intelligence muttered something beneath his breath.

On the darkened visiplates, light flared suddenly outward from the space ship as though a skyrocket were taking off from its surface. It glowed brilliantly for a moment, far aloft, then died away leaving only a faint afterglow in the sky.

The radio man wasted no time scribbling his report. "AA says that was one of our homing rockets," he announced verbally.

His awed tones echoed over the microphone and reached the ears of the President and his staff. Before they could digest the information, another skyrocket flamed outward from the space ship, and another, and another.

In a matter of minutes, the fragments of the missiles drifted down from the upper atmosphere, rattling on rooves and deserted streets in the darkened city, splashing into the surrounding waters, and thudding to earth in New Jersey and Long Island.

Momentary silence wrapped

the military staff rooms in Washington and New York. General Brandenhurst, trying to ignore a fresh surge of pain deep inside him, was dimly aware of a buzz of voices over the communicator when the officials at the White House recovered from their shock.

"General Brandenhurst! General Brandenhurst!" The President had to repeat himself before the commanding officer in New York realized he was being called.

"Sir?"

"We must destroy this airship at any cost," the President said. "We cannot delay. General Foley has ordered suicide crews mustered at the Ohio Nuclear Bombing Command.

"We are sending three B-72's equipped with A-bombs under orders to get as close to the object as possible and then blow themselves up!"

"But—" General Brandenhurst fought upward through successive waves of pain, and knew that his own hours were numbered—"think of the radioactivity over this area!"

"We have thought of it," the President replied. "The ship is high. The city will escape any real blast damage. As for radioactivity, the prevailing wind aloft is eastward and most of it will be carried over the ocean.

The danger is little, and it's far better than losing the city and everyone in it. I'd order the H-bomb if we dared."

Struggling for control of his body, General Brandenhurst saw the flaw in the strategy in an instant of great lucidity.

"The ship has made no move to attack us, Mr. President. It may not be an enemy craft at all," he protested.

The President laughed bitterly. "It's not one of ours! They're playing with us as we did with the British at Bunker Hill. Waiting till they see the whites of our eyes.

"Right now they may be releasing clouds of germs—or something so much worse we can't imagine it. No, General. I trust your judgment. But you're a sick man . . ."

Far off in Ohio, the six jet engines of a B-72 high altitude bomber trailed yellow flames through the night as the giant plane roared along its concrete runway. As it became airborne, the engines of a second and third bomber coughed and spit fire in the darkness.

Klond, waiting word from the maternity chamber, shook his head sadly.

"These people—if people they are—must be sick," he observed. "Else they would not be so war-

like. But we have the means to cure them."

"To cure them of many things," Armo agreed. "To give them the means to live as long as ours, and thus a new attitude toward life itself."

He paused reflectively. Longevity, perhaps more than anything else, had been responsible for eliminating warfare among Martians eons ago. A man with centuries before him, with little fear of disease, does not easily throw his life away. But by the same token—

"Why should we risk all that lies ahead of us to investigate this barbarous world?" he demanded. "We may be killed."

Before Klond could answer, the communicator screen glowed and the image of a man in sterile cap and gown took shape.

"Your wife is having a difficult time, Commander," the doctor announced.

Klond started with a fear as old as the race. His features, almost golden in the distorted color pickup, froze.

"Is there—?"

The doctor was contrite. "I didn't mean to alarm you," he replied. "There is no real danger. It has been centuries since we lost a mother. This will require extensive surgery, but, with tissue-seal, Erna will be on her feet again in a day. What I

wanted to convey was that it will take longer than we expected, and we must have complete stability."

Obviously relieved, Klord nodded. "You shall have it, doctor."

Armo, interpreting his chief's words as an order to withdraw, reached for the power control that would send the ship skyward. But Klord flashed him a quick warning.

"We are safe here," he declared. "Nothing has been fired at us for an hour. I think the inhabitants must know now, since we have not replied to their attacks, that we are friendly."

"No telling what they may be plotting," Armo scowled. "I say, let us leave."

Crossing to his side, where he towered above him, Klord placed a hand on his aide's shoulder. "We know these people have accomplished much, and are capable of more," but we do not know whether they are of our race.

"If we do not find out, we have failed in our mission. And our people cannot afford to send another expedition like this for generations. Let us descend!"

Reluctantly, but compelled by the inflexible will of his leader, Armo obeyed. The space ship began to settle downward.

The pain eased off again and General Brandenhurst, aware that the moments of respite were becoming fewer, relaxed gratefully. A man of less indomitable will would long since have taken to his deathbed, but the general wanted to die in harness. Emerging from his personal canopy of agony, he turned his attention to the visiplat focussed on the alien aircraft.

He saw the space ship begin its descent, and even while he wondered whether this was the start of an attack the B-72's hove into view on a second screen. The planes were, according to comparative readings in the lower corner of the two viewers, somewhat higher than the spheroid.

Before the general's eyes, the lead ship of the three commenced a run intended to bring it crashing squarely upon the globe. General Brandenhurst nodded in mute approval as the homber pilot, observing the change of altitude in the space ship, altered his course slightly downward, keeping his nose on the target.

In the general's ears came an echo of his thoughts as one of the members of the President's military cabinet, still on a hook-up to the headquarters in New York, muttered:

"Good man!"

No other type of pilot would have volunteered for this joust

with death, the General reflected. But a jingle of alarm sounded in his mind as the descent of the space ship suddenly grew more rapid and the bomber nosed down to follow it.

Behind the leading plane the other two, which had been hovering in reserve, suddenly went into vertical dives in an effort to get below the spheroid and flatten out at a level on which they could intercept it.

The screens went blank as the technicians guiding the telescopes lost the aerial objects and panned rapidly earthward in an effort to pick them up again.

General Brandenhurst's alarm quickened. His visual memory of courses and coordinates warned him that the giant sphere was falling too rapidly to be overtaken at once by the bombers, even though they plunged earthward with jets wide open.

The B-72's might, indeed, reach their target—but could they do it before it was so low that an A-bomb would wreak serious damage upon New York?

Unable to see the aerial combatants on his screens, the general computed the chances in his mind and issued instructions to the anti-aircraft batteries.

"Open fire at once—maximum altitude." His plan was to stop the space ship before it could get dangerously close to the city.

The order rasped into headphones and loudspeakers around the defense ring, and within an instant it was being translated into action. As the general watched the visiplates for a glimpse of bombers and space ship, one of the telescopes panned through the high-level barrage that resulted.

Blossoms of orange flame were blooming everywhere in the night skies, and phosphorescent tracer fragments from the shattering shells wove an all-but-impenetrable pattern of flying steel through the heavens.

It was as though, at the command of the military architect on the ground below, a vast ceiling of spinning, twisting metal had been raised above the city. Particles whirled off into the darkness and, losing their impetus, arched earthward. They were replaced by the glowing pollen of newly blossomed flowers, the fragments made visible as a psychological hazard to enemy pilots.

General Brandenhurst nodded grimly. That storm of flying steel should keep the alien ship aloft, within safe range of the suicide bombers, if anything could.

But even as the reassurance came to mind, one of the telescopes picked up the strange sphere and panned downward

with it. Only for an instant did it remain within range of the viewer; yet in that brief moment the general saw it plummet through the high-level barrage as though the bursting shells were not there.

His startled eyes retained a glimpse of the tracer fragments bounding off into the night as they were deflected from the globe by an invisible barrier. Then the image was gone.

At lower altitudes, the fire was more intense but audio reports told him the same incredible thing was happening there. And, although the AA batteries ceased fire as the globe passed through their defenses, the B-72's were forced to level off above the barrage until the last twisting bit of phosphorescence vanished downward in the night.

The delay was all the aliens needed. In a moment, the globe was safely below the altitude at which A-bombs could be used without damage to the city, and the attack ordered in Washington was cancelled.

In his communicator, General Brandenhurst could hear startled exclamations from the President's chambers, but his attention was fixed on the space ship, now stationary at about 5,000 feet.

AA shells were exploding close about it with an intensity never

matched in military history. The blasts, pin-pointed on the target, were bursting around the ship so that its invisible barrier was silhouetted in flame some ten yards off the hull.

Splinters of steel were rattling on the rooves and streets below like rain, but they seemed to make no impression on the globe. Nonplussed, the general ordered a cease fire. The barrage could be renewed instantly in the event of a hostile move; meanwhile, it was a waste of invaluable ammunition.

Transfixed with a mixture of awe and fear, General Brandenhurst and the military advisors in Washington studied the giant globe on their visiplates. They could see the exterior, now, as clearly as though they were within a few hundred yards. But the view told them nothing of what was going on inside.

Never had such a strain been put upon the stabilizing machinery of the space ship, though it had been built to keep the globe sailing smoothly through turbulences at which its designers could only guess.

As the muffled roar of the barrage died away outside, the hum of the atomic engines within became overwhelming. The two leaders of the expedition, alarmed by the intensity of the

sound, gave the order for reduction of power simultaneously.

They exchanged worried glances as the noise subsided. Klord broke the silence with a grunt and jabbed violently at two buttons on the communicator that channeled him to the hospital section.

"My wife"—the intensity of his thought hardly needed electronic aid to reach the information section—"is she all right?"

The bland face of an attendant turned away for a second, apparently relaying the request for information to someone out of range. When it confronted the screen again, there was the suggestion of a smile.

"Fine, Commander. But the doctor says he's going to need a regeneration treatment if you keep this up. He's aged ten years."

Klord's lips parted in a grin of appreciation, in spite of the beads of perspiration shining on his high forehead.

"Tell him he can have the regeneration chamber next to me," he flashed back.

Armo looked up from another communicator channel to report that the ship had weathered the storm without serious damage.

"One sub-generator burned out," the aide announced quietly. "But the crews will have it repaired in a few hours. We'll be

in good shape by the time we cross the orbit of the ninth planet."

Klord grinned. "We aren't crossing that orbit—not yet, at least. We're going to make a landing!"

"There? In the middle of that city?"

Klord nodded, studying his companion closely. This was a critical moment, one which he had anticipated since the first attack on the space ship. Armo was certain to resist, but the commander waited, leaving it for the other to open the argument.

"There isn't enough room to land," the aide protested.

The commander indicated the long, green rectangle in the center of the island. "Wide enough for two such ships as ours."

"Plenty of room to bury us," Armo agreed. He ran a hand nervously through his thick shock of white hair. "Once we're down, we have no defense. We must collapse our meteor screen to contact the planet; our stabilizers and shock absorbers could no longer protect us from concussion."

Stepping over to the picture of the city in the magniviewer, Klord used it as a lecturer might refer to a lantern slide.

"These creatures are obviously well advanced in a technical

sense," he began. "The architecture of their buildings, the propulsive power of their aircraft, the nature of their weapons, all prove the point. They are intelligent.

"The question is whether theirs is a malignant intelligence, whether they attacked because that is their nature or because they had a good reason to do so. On that point, we have some evidence.

"We know they detected our presence while we were still far from their coastline. Thus, they must have been alertly watching for the approach of any aircraft, and since they could not have been expecting a space ship it must have been one from their own world.

"When they first contacted us, they displayed visual signals. We replied, and they attacked. But consider—had their first intention been to attack, they would never have shown lights to mark their positions.

"That must have been done for the purpose of identification. Unquestionably, then, there must have been an answering signal that one of their own ships would have given. Our reply did not correspond, hence we were attacked—obviously, we were assumed to be an enemy.

"The necessity for such a careful watch over their coastline,

and for a system of immediate identification of friendly aircraft, suggests only one thing. They must have feared a specific enemy, and they must have had good reason to suppose that this enemy would attack them.

"Thus, from their standpoint, they have merely been defending themselves against a real danger. They are not likely to be savage by nature because if they were, they would never have survived to reach the stage of civilization at which we find them."

Klord paused, and caught Armo nodding appreciatively. He pressed his advantage quickly.

"Granting their intelligence, it must be apparent to them by now that we are not hostile. Our sudden descent must have frightened them, but I am sure that we have nothing further to fear."

Armo studied the control panel before which he was seated. He was obviously affected by his commander's reasoning. But he had reservations.

"You thought we were safe once before," he pointed out. "That time we came through. But if they attack while we are grounded, we would have no chance."

"We might."

"What do you mean?"

Klord's eyes glowed with en-

thusiasm. "They showed a set of visual signals on that first contact with us. To another ship of their own kind, it would be a friendly gesture. If we repeated that same signal now . . . we might convince them we are friends, even though different!"

General Brandenhurst was in sole charge of the defense. The President and his advisors, baffled and far from the scene, summarized it up in a sentence.

"There's no time left for consultation."

Then, helpless, they assumed the role of silent spectators, their intent faces framed on the visiplate on the general's desk.

The commander, his every defense alerted, the skies thick with fighter and bomber planes circling about the space ship, the night criss-crossed with the white beams of searchlights and the glare of aerial flares, also watched. He was trying to anticipate the invaders' next move.

But when it came it caught him completely by surprise. A ring of luminescence rippled around the equator of the spheroid as it hung, almost motionless, a mile above the city.

The general stared, and over the audio channel from Washington there came an audible gasp.

"That's the recognition signal

for tonight, sir," an aide advised.

General Brandenhurst knew it. Recovering from his initial surprise, he acted instantly on the knowledge.

"All units to hold their fire, no matter what happens," he snapped. "All aircraft to withdraw and maintain a minimum distance of two miles from that globe. No attack unless directly ordered.

"Now"—he turned, so that he was addressing the men whose faces showed on the Washington visiplate—"let's see what happens. I think they're trying to tell us they're friends!"

Slowly, like the shutter of a huge camera opening in the sky, the circling fighters and bombers drew back from the space ship, giving it room to maneuver.

It waited until they were clear, then with obvious deliberation, easily followed by planes and searchlights, it moved over the city until it came above Central Park where it began a vertical descent.

Only as it neared the ground could those on the earth appreciate its huge bulk. It loomed above the buildings that flanked the park on either side, and its bulging equator hung far above trees and walks.

The windows of apartment houses on both Fifth avenue and Central Park West were jammed

with spectators, disregarding military orders to obtain a glimpse of the visiting monster. They watched as slender supporting rods ran out from the hull to steady the globe when it touched the ground, and a ripple of excitement spread with the realization that they were entertaining visitors from space.

Police, alerted as the destination of the ship became apparent, threw a cordon around the area. Not a soul walked across the greens, and the doors of the underground air raid shelters, where thousands huddled in bewilderment, remained closed.

There was no sign from the space ship. It was as though the occupants were waiting some display of official welcome.

"They should do something soon," Armo fretted. "They aren't going to ignore us now."

Klord, busily studying the viewing screens, reassured him. "They are doing something. There seems to be a ring of uniformed officials around this area. They have not approached us, so their purpose must be to keep the crowd away."

Leaving the control panel, Armo stepped to the side of his commander and peered over his shoulder.

"They seem to be very like us," Klord observed. The fact, he felt,

was ample justification for the risk he had taken.

"They have only five fingers," Armo pointed out precisely. "And their ears are quite large and ugly."

"Roughly the same skull capacity, though," Klord insisted. "And they are erect bipeds, like us. The differences are slight, except for color."

"That," Armo added, "is superficial. Look! Someone is coming!"

The olive-drab cavalcade of military vehicles had roared up Broadway from the Battery in record time, and it screeched to a halt on the driveway nearest to the space ship with sirens heralding its arrival.

From the lead car, General Dale Brandenburst, trying hard to stand erect despite a surge of inner pain, stepped into view. A cluster of lesser officers gathered beside him, dwarfing his slight figure and almost hiding it from the onlookers.

At a respectful distance, another and larger group of officers took shape and stood awaiting orders. Television cameras, already at the scene, picked the men up in the glare of white spotlights, then turned swiftly toward the huge globe in response to a shout from the surrounding buildings.

"It's opening! They're coming out!"

A curved section of the space ship's hull slid back silently, and in the same instant General Brandenhurst started resolutely across the green. There had been no hostile move from the vessel, and the opening of the door was the last proof he needed of the occupants' friendly intentions. He knew he had little time left.

A murmur ran through the streets.

Inside the ship, analyzers sampled the air and found it acceptable to Martian lungs.

"He comes alone," Klord noted, studying the general. "I, too, will go alone to meet him."

Armo, concentrating as the general came within telepathic range, frowned. "He is a man of courage, a good man, by his vibrations," he reported. "But there is something wrong. There is a dark shadow across his mind."

"I go! Armo, act as you must until I return." Klord stepped into a car which whisked him from the control room at the center of the ship to the open portal. A moment later, he came into view on the screens where Armo was watching the outside scene.

The crowds of earthlings had their first view of the interstellar

visitors as Klord and the general approached one another on the green. After a moment of silence, a rumble of distaste ran among the onlookers.

"They're freaks!" said a colonel in the group that had accompanied General Brandenhurst.

"What did you expect from another world?" a major reasoned. "They're almost like us, at that."

"But they look strange! And their skins are a different color from anything I've ever seen. Damned if we're going to let them come here and boss us around! Couldn't trust 'em!"

The thought was being put into words elsewhere in the crowds, as well.

In the ship, Armo could distinguish only a background of hostility. There were too many shades of thought, and too many people. They impressed themselves on his mind only because of their mass; as individuals, they were out of range.

So, as the two men came together on the greensward, he concentrated on Klord, to whom his mind was finely attuned by long association. He became aware, through Klord's brain, of words spoken by the earthling, but they made no sense to either Martian. The tone, however, was one of reserve.

Klord spoke in reply, exercis-

ing vocal cords that were seldom used, and to the man of Earth these words, too, meant nothing. They were not intended to convey meaning, but to act as a balm to the man's auditory nerves while Klord projected a picture image to him.

Armo shared with the Earthman the message from Klord's brain. It was a picture of an earthling and a Martian, walking side by side, their arms around one another's shoulders.

Instantly, Klord extended his hand and the earthling took it. For a moment, the onlooking Armo sensed a strong emotion of joy and triumph in the Earthman. But only for a moment.

It was replaced by a red blanket of pain that struck the telepathic cords with horrifying impact. The general doubled with the spasm, jerking his hand convulsively away from Klord.

Through the crowds of watching humans ran a tidal wave of fear and distrust as their emissary crumpled to the ground—apparently on contact with the Martian.

The only ready means of stopping them—a focussed force beam—would kill thousands, and Klord with them. Armo hesitated, knowing that his chief was equipped with a radiation projector for personal defense, and as he waited Klord made

telepathic contact through the confusion.

"Armo! It is the sickness of the cells! Quickly!"

Even while he communicated, Klord drew his projector and beamed a wide ray in a semi-circle on the ground in front of the approaching men. Brilliant in the glare of floodlights, the glistening green grass blackened abruptly where the ray touched.

The officers halted, unwilling to cross that line of death, and Armo acted during their momentary uncertainty. His order sent a medical team from the hospital section of the space ship racing toward the open portal with a wheeled, self-powered blood-stream irradiator.

It was an emergency treatment, seldom required among the Martians themselves. The equipment would beam into the patient's arteries a radioactive that instantly attacked and killed the abnormal cells as it reached them, without harming others.

Armo saw the medical men leave the portal and come into view on his screen, and at the same time became aware, through Klord, of aircraft thundering overhead. His mercy unit reached Klord and the general in the seconds it took him to realize that the crowd could not know whether the squad was coming to help or to torture.

But Klord's warning that the general was almost gone reached him then, and he made no move to call back the doctors who were adjusting their apparatus. And Klord echoed his feelings.

"We cannot stand by while he dies. We'll have to risk it!"

He knew when the beam entered the sluggish bloodstream, and he imagined he could actually follow the course of the radioactive through the inert body. The throngs of Earthmen had fallen silent, and their silence was accentuated by the overhead rumble of aircraft exhaust.

Klord, a head taller on the vision screen even than the medical technicians of his own race, turned toward the Earthman, waving his hands to show they were empty, and gesturing for the men to advance.

They moved forward, angry faces uncertain. But ahead of the others, one wore a serpentine insignia of the medical corps on his collar. He dropped to his knees beside the general, to make a quick but thorough examination. Klord and Armo waited, knowing that the doctor's mind was filled with fear and indecision—and still unsure themselves of how their treatment would work for a man of another race. It had checked the imminent death, but the sick cells . . .

Then resolution brought the doctor to his feet, and he turned to the milling crowd. Neither Klord nor Armo understood the words that came, but their meaning was clear.

"General Brandenhurst is alive," the doctor said. There was disbelief and awe in his voice, but it was firm and clear. "He is alive—and from the signs, as far as I can tell, he is even going to recover. I have been attending him, and I know this is impossible—to us. But it is happening. And these . . . these . . ." He waved an arm toward Klorn and the technicians. ". . . these men are responsible."

The doctor was shouting. In the eerie silence, his voice carried easily across the green, and his words were repeated by those within earshot. The repetitions grew louder as they spread like waves to the ranks behind, and to the crowds in the streets, and up the sides of the buildings where people hung from windows.

The transition was gradual. No man could say precisely at what instant it occurred, but one moment it was a whisper; the next, it was a loud rumble of approval, and a second later it was the roar of thousands upon thousands of human voices, cheering in the night for the visitors from space.

THIS WORLD IS **CONDEMNED**

BY WARD BOTSFORD

ILLUSTRATED BY BEECHAM

The Earthmen came to the peaceful world of Yull with the high justice and the law. In their sureness, they looked it over quickly and doomed it to a state of near exile, cut off from all civilization and trade. It had no machines, to be sure—but it had something else!

The last film had been shown, the final spectrograph analyzed and there was silence in the high walled room. Somewhere a calculator chuckled quietly to itself as final data was fed it. Then almost apologetically, the ting of a bell; the operator slid a sheet of paper from a slot and handed it to the Director.

A moment he scanned it and then: "As we surmised, Antares 4 is a A5-17-b type culture. Excellent stability figure and a high degree of potential intelligence—however, in accordance with MC rules, the culture is several levels too low to permit union with the Confederation."

He stopped speaking and the several hundred people began to leave the chamber. The Director remained as did Telmann and Infrost.

Telmann watched the Director closely and held his gaze while saying, as if to himself, "For once I think the calculator is mistaken."

Infröst and the Director raised respective eyebrows.

"How so?"

"Oh, really that wasn't meant to be heard. You know I was commander of that expedition and those people are different—"

Infröst laughed, "Your own survey showed them to be

thoroughly humanoid. Surely you're not trying to say that it is a non-Human civilization!"

"No, not that at all—well, you'll see for yourself."

The Director's voice broke in, "How soon will you leave for Antares, Telmann?"

Telmann calculated swiftly, "Well, it's about 177 light years from Earth which means a trip of about 10 ship days. Since you want their ambassador here before you leave for Vega 7, we will leave tomorrow."

"Excellent. My trip to Vega is scheduled for February 30, so that will leave the necessary two weeks visiting time. And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me—"

"Certainly, sir."

Again the high walled room was silent.

The Delta class cruiser of the Confederation winked into normal space 20 light minutes from the MO redness that was Antares. While calculators were plotting a course to the blazing primary's fourth planet, Telmann and Infrost conferred in the latter's cabin.

"How soon will we touch down?"

"Not for about twelve hours. Yull's main Continent is asleep now."

"Yull?" Infrost asked.

"The inhabitants' name for their planet."

"Oh."

"By the way, you've been briefed on them, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I would very much like to hear your views. In the Director's chamber you seemed to think that they were somehow—'odd'."

Telmann frowned, "No, not odd exactly. They are Telepaths, you know."

"Well, that's hardly 'odd'. We've found Telepaths on Sirius 5, Procyon 7, Castor 6—on a lot of planets. Strange as it may seem to us, Telepathy is a rule outside our own system—not the exception to it."

"That's true, of course. These people are long range Telepaths, too. Though that's not too unusual—Archernat 5's are."

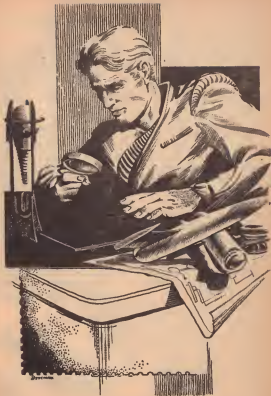
"Then, what—?"

"It's hard to put it into words, but I think what struck me was their indifference. It wasn't any *laissez-faire* or Ghandism. It was almost as if they were *absolutely* sure of themselves."

Telmann stopped short, aware that he was being a little silly.

Infrost grinned, "Well, we'll see tomorrow."

The field on which the cruiser rested was covered with short, well-cropped grass. A small stream with strange plumaged



birds resting on its surface was nearby. Telmann was sitting by the banks watching some children in a grove of tall stately trees playing a game with a big ball and some sticks. Telmann reflected that if it were not for the fact that the children never spoke or laughed, this could be a scene on Earth—almost.

The children had seen him and the ship; had stared after the way of children and gone back to their play. Telmann reflected on what the attitude of children on Earth, say three centuries ago, would have been had an alien ship set down in one of their parks.

"Peaceful, isn't it?"

Telmann turned and saw Infrost leaning against a tree.

"Yes, very. How did you make out?"

"Very well. They've appointed an ambassador to go with us to Earth."

"And do you, too, find them 'odd'?"

"No—although you're right, they are very sure of themselves, and for no particular reason."

There was a frown on Telmann's face. "I don't know, they have every right to be proud of their planet. No wars, very little disease, poverty nonexistent."

"Yes, but practically no technical achievement at all."

"Well, isn't that because of

their Telepathy? I mean, doesn't it make up for their lack of technical skill?"

Infrost shook his head, took off his jacket and sat down. "No, you've got the cart before the horse. As far as I can figure out they developed Telepathy *after* they discovered that any major technical device was impossible."

"Impossible? How so?"

"Their buildings are all plastic. Even their cars are plastic. No metal. This planet has an almost complete dearth of ferrous ores and metals, generally. As far as I can find from borings and from information they've given me, Uranium and Thorium are unknown except as theoretical possibilities."

"Hmmm. We'll probably find that the Urey-Legham distribution curve of this system has dumped the metals on another planet."

"Probably."

"Do they know yet the Confederation MC rules governing cultures of a lower than 19 rating?"

"No, that's not my task. The Director will tell them all about that. They'll be disappointed, I think—though they'll never let us see it. They're a race that doesn't believe in showing emotion. Tharax, who is their chief of government and who will be accompanying us back to Earth.

has been with me most of this week. He's been very keen on the Confederation—and, incidentally, on the possibilities of trade."

Telmann idly skipped a stone in the water.

"Well, a 17-b culture can trade, can't it?—even if it can't enter the Confederation."

"Yes, theoretically; the MC grants permission but there are practical considerations which are going to strictly limit it, I'm afraid."

"How do you mean?"

"Nothing to trade. After all, what the Confederation needs are metals: Thorium, Magnesium, Uranium."

"How about food or culture in some basic form?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Their food production is strictly limited by their lack of metal. Enough for themselves but not for others. As for culture, it's entirely in the Telepathic vein. No visible or audible signs to speak of. It's a shame, too, because without metals, they've reached a static point in their cultural development. I think they have the necessary drive and intelligence, too." He watched Telmann skip another stone across the placid waters. "You know, I think they're awfully nice people."

They sat there by the banks

of the little stream skipping stones with red Antares looking down on the peaceful planet.

Ships coming in from Vega or Formalhaut—from the thousand strange named places which the Confederation embraced—the rattle and roar of cargo booms—the clatter of incoming and outgoing passengers—A Great Space Port—

"Director, this is Fer Tharax of Yull, Ambassador to the Confederation."

"We are most happy to meet you. If you are not too fatigued with your journey, we will go directly to my offices so that I may explain the laws of the Confederation to you."

Tharax' thought came easily, "As the Director wishes."

Telmann and Infrost watched Tharax' expression closely as the little NGC took them swiftly toward the imposing spires of the Confederation buildings some fifteen kilometers away. Infrost noted that Tharax' keen glances slipped easily over the panorama of the mighty civilization which spread a thousand meters below. He was certainly not overawed by it. Interested, yes, but not overawed. Which was strange. Usually when so non-technical a civilization as Tharax' was introduced to so highly technical a one as Earth's, the result was

likely to be awe, approaching upon worship.

Then they were in the cool offices of the Director and the Director was telling Tharax of the Laws of the Confederation. He was telling how bitter experience had taught the Confederation that until a culture had reached a certain level, technical information must be withheld for the good of both the Confederation and the Planet concerned. There was an embarrassed pause. Infrost felt that even the Director had been charmed by Tharax' odd paradox of interest and indifference. Perhaps the Director did not wish to tell Tharax that—

Tharax' thought was clear and quick, "It will be impossible for my people to receive technical aid from the Confederation." It was a statement, not a question.

The Director: "That is so. We are sorry—"

Tharax waved his hand as if the matter was of no moment.

"But Trade, is that possible?"

"Yes, so long as the imports that Yull makes are non-technical. The exact rules will be explained to you by our Head of Commerce."

"Am I to be allowed to stay on Earth?"

"For a period of two of our weeks. After that, you or another agent, may visit Earth once a

year. Incidentally, during your stay, you may purchase whatever you wish up to a weight limit of a thousand kilograms—technical devices beyond a certain level excepted. The Confederation will pay for it."

"Thank you."

"He is gone?"

"Yes, Director, this morning."

"You have a list of his purchases?"

"Yes, Director. He did not even ask for any technical equipment or technical books—usually they try to take some with them."

"What did he take?"

"Mostly books, Director."

"On what subjects?"

"Here is a complete list, Director. Mostly on Music and Art, some on Philosophy and History, quite a number on Hobbies and a number on Sports. He used less than 200 kilograms of weight and expended 476 credits."

The Director looked puzzled.

"Strange—very strange—yes, yet I like him; I rather like him."

"I, too, Director."

It was almost a year later according to Earth reckoning, that Infrost had occasion to notice Antares 4 again. And then it was practically by accident. Glancing

over import figures which had been left on his desk, he looked idly down the list—found that Teg with her greatly advanced 20-c culture had exported over twenty billion basic credits last year—found that Hardle with almost that amount—a planet called Yull had exported something over one billion credits, which wasn't bad for a 17-b culture—

"Yull!" Why that was Antares 4! One billion credits! Impossible! Nothing to trade! Nothing at all!

He pressed a button on his desk visor and his secretary's face swam into view.

"Will you get me the Head of Commerce, please?" A few moments pause and the striking black eyes which were the Head of Commerce's chief asset looked quizzically at him.

"I have glanced at a sheet of the latest planetary exports, sir, and I noticed that Yull, of the Antares System, has exported something in excess of one billion credits. Surely this is a mistake. I was chief of the second survey of Yull and I reported at that time that due to a lack of metal and material culture, as well as excess food stuffs, export was almost impossible. Would you check this for me?"

"Surely."

One billion credits. Impossible

—and yet, Tharax and his people were so—

"That figure is correct."

"But how? To where?"

"As to where, mostly to Earth, although a large amount does go to Dras and Grander of the Mixar System. Apparently, they only export to groups settled by Earthmen. Mixar is Earth settled, you know. As to what, I really don't know. You would have to consult the Director."

The Head of Commerce smiled and Infrost broke the connection after a courteous word of thanks.

The Director's office had not changed since that first day, years ago that Infrost had crossed its portals. Nor had the Director changed much. Still the efficient but human creature which commanded obedience and respect. Now the Director was speaking:

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I had noticed the import level of Antares 4. Something less than one billion credits, wasn't it?"

"Slightly more, sir."

"Well, then?"

"But Director, what could they export?"

The Director smiled—indeed, he almost laughed.

"I think you will be surprised. Yes, very surprised. They export postage stamps."

"Stamps, sir?" Infroest asked.

"Stamps."

"But I do not understand—they aren't—"

"Yull is now a prime producer of Philatelitics."

Infroest was the picture of surprise, astonishment and disbelief. The Director continued, "You'll remember that Tharax took a number of books on hobbies with him. I find that among these were a number of volumes on Stamp Collecting. When a representative of the Earth's Trade Commission visited Yull, Tharax asked and received permission to export stamps. What is wrong with that? Philately is a hobby as ancient almost as is Earth herself."

"But, Director, it is impossible! The inhabitants have no written language at all—they have no postal system, none is necessary; they are long range Telepaths."

"Again you are right. That is true," the Director replied with a suspicion of a laugh.

"But, Director, then that is fraud!"

"By no means. They actually do send some letters now to places outside of Yull and even a little to themselves, I understand. Of course, they had no printing presses but that was well within their cultural development. They made one them-

selves, patterned, I should say, after pictures in our history books. Hand presses, probably. Crude, but workable. I'm told they put out beautiful stamps. Already they have over 500 issues. With the first money they made by selling them, they began to advertise. And—well, you know that philately is Earth's largest hobby."

Infroest's look of disbelief and surprise was now one of respect and amusement.

"I begin to see. A very shrewd people. A wonderful people."

The Director nodded with enthusiasm. "A wonderful planet and a wonderful people, indeed. It is one to watch."

Infroest looked a question.

"Oh, yes," the Director smiled, "I've been there just recently—when you were on Spica 3. Tharax has re-applied for entry into the Confederation."

"It is really a shame that his people cannot join."

"But they can! No, this case is one of mind over matter. As you know, the Council gives me wide freedom to overrule the Calculator when I feel it is desirable. This is most certainly a 'Desirable Case.' Any people so ingenious as to be able to make one billion credits without assistance of any kind in less than a year is a people of a high cultural level, I assure you. The fact that

they chose so erudite a method as philately is another mark in their favor."

The Director arose and strolled to the high windows that looked out across the city. He turned to Infrost and said, "You know, Tharax hasn't spent more than a few thousand of those credits. He told me he was absolutely sure of getting into the Confederation and he wanted to keep the money to buy metal. As Telmann said, they are so sure of themselves! Well," a real laugh this time, "do you agree that it was wise to allow them in the Confederation?"

"Indeed, yes, Director. I am happy they have achieved a higher status so rapidly. In fact, I believe it is a record, is it not, Director?"

"I believe so. And would you be so good as to change their level with the MC to A5-19-b. I would appreciate that."

"Certainly, Director. And thank you."

When he was gone, the Director called his secretary, "When is my next appointment, please?"

"In one hour, Director."

"Thank you. Would you please see that I am not disturbed during this time."

"Yes, Director."

From a drawer in his desk, the Director removed a large book, a small magnifying glass and a pair of blunt-end tweezers. Then from another drawer, he carefully removed a large sheet of heavy paper interlined with perforations and with artistic markings on the smaller squares. He removed one square and looked at it under the magnifying glass. Tharax had given him the first of the new commemorative issue—the general public issue wouldn't be out for over another month—twenty-four perfect Red-Greens, showing the great seal of the Confederation of which he was Director. The Director chuckled joyfully to himself and began to enter the stamps on the pages of the large book.

Watch for THE SONS OF TOMORROW, by Irving E. Cox, Jr. This stirring novelette of high space will be in the next issue of ROCKET STORIES!

JACK ROGUE

BY JOHN JAKES

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

He stood at a turning point in history, and his mind was blank to all forces around him. Yet when the final act was played, he knew as few others ever learned what his destiny was to be, and the true worth of his ultimate power.

Motion.

That was the first sensation. A gentle restless rocking in endless deeps of liquid warmth. There was no gradual awakening. One moment, he had simply not existed and the next brought full sense perception.

He examined the situation. He had no memories, yet, and so his brain was a vast board waiting to be scrawled upon. There was the darkness which seemed normal to him because he did not know the function of eyes. There was the sloshing roll of liquid against him, but he did not know what the concept of liquid implied. On the lowest level of



SECOND



consciousness, he felt but did not interpret. He did not even form silent symbols to correspond with the sensations. He had no symbols.

He felt vague movement in his limbs. He found that he could control that movement. He flexed things at the far ends of his being. There was a sound of agitated liquid rustling, and slivers of hardness pulled from him.

Abruptly, as if it was a signal, he felt the liquid drop away. It slid down over his body in a ghostly line, and was gone with its warmth.

He got control of more muscle groups. They functioned easily, without strain. At last, he explored the operation of his eyes, and they opened quickly.

It was a small gray chamber. He lay in a hammock-like affair of wide fiber bands. He swung off the hammock which was fastened from thick brackets in two walls.

The floor of the chamber was a steadying influence. It felt warm beneath his feet. He watched as the last of the liquid vanished in tiny whirlpools down several grilled drains. Rubber tubes with shining needle tips slithered back into wall openings.

He took his first step, and had no trouble.

Instantly, his mind began to

form symbols. It was as if he had suddenly learned the business of encoding sensations into words in a moment, without the painfully tedious procedure of the successive steps of children. But again, he knew nothing of what was a child, or how did you learn to talk.

His first question was uttered aloud in a firm, adult voice.

"Who am I?"

A portion of the gray wall moved upward in response to a distant hum, and he saw another room, somewhat larger, with the same gray walls. In the center of the ridged floor stood a square gray column.

On top of the column was a crystal panel. As he rested one hand against the edge of the door, shimmering scarlet letters flashed upon the screen.

Walk forward. Information here.

He obeyed the command, holding his mind open for impressions. A slot opened below the crystal screen. Something thin and white showed. The sign blinked like a bloodshot eye and new letters appeared.

Pull this out.

He took the sheet of paper from the slot, feeling its heavy texture, marveling with childlike wonder at the new miracles springing to life before him. On

the paper were black marks. He stared at them. A whole new learning process was completed in a moment.

He read the first line eagerly. "You are Jackrogue."

He knew instinctively somehow that Jackrogue was a name. A name differentiated you from other names. So, other beings must exist somewhere attached to the other names. He read on, excited by the new prospect.

"Examine yourself in the opposite wall."

He glanced up, startled. Another being stared at him. He realized that the other being was himself.

He could not catalogue his appearance in terms of other appearances. He noted merely the black tangled hair, the harsh lips, the dreaming yet deadly eyes, the darkly brown muscular body. He almost felt that he had no right to possess such a body. It was . . . too perfect. It lent an atmosphere of precision and power that, for some unexplainable reason, should not have normally existed.

"You are naked," the paper said. He dug into the rapidly filling mental identification files. That meant without covering.

A bin fell open in the gray column. He read the next words. "Take the clothes from the bin.

Put them on. Do not read further until you have done so."

Rapidly, he followed orders. There was a pair of green trousers. He slipped those on. Next came soft black boots reaching almost to his knees. He donned a rough brown leather vest and attached something long and silvery to his belt. It had a cross piece near the top.

The sign bled on the crystal screen once more.

Further information.

He fairly tore the new sheet from the slot. There were only a few words this time.

"Go into the next chamber. Do nothing but wait."

A second door was open in the gray wall. Hastily he walked toward it, the sword slapping on his thigh.

He entered the third room. It was a vast chamber. One side was covered with endless banks of instruments. And another side . . .

He felt his legs grow weak and he staggered to lean against the gray hardness of the wall.

The concept, the new magnificent . . . his mind could not grasp it.

Blackness, but it was a great blackness that seemed tangible, sweeping away from the tall window in empire after empire of ebony. Bits of light whirled in the blackness, forming bril-

liant patterns of gold and red and blue and silver in all that forlorn dark.

He peered through the window, becoming aware of the frightening immensity he watched. And then he realized that he was moving *through* that blackness toward one of the whorls of brightness.

Fresh symbols and their meanings flooded over him. There was a distant pounding hum.

Motors!

He was moving.

Skip!

He was moving toward a . . . planet . . . in a . . . solar system . . . in a . . . galaxy . . . in a universe . . . in . . . infinity! The particular sun began to loom with startling proximity. It was large and pulsing with red brilliance.

The breath whispered in his chest. The motor noises beat in his ears. He was being carried through the star-dripping night of space toward a planet of an unknown sun. There would be other beings. He was Jackrogue. He was alive. He had been born.

His voice rocked with tremendous happy laughter . . .

. . . and stopped.

Relays functioned slightly in his mind. He felt . . . what was the symbol . . . guilt. For the banks of memory told him who he

was, but they had also told him one other fact which he felt, somehow, he should not know. And yet the very thought of that fact brought revulsion, horror.

Mentally, he ticked off the facts.

He was Jackrogue. He pressed his skull against the window, blotting out the sights of light on dark.

He was alive. Stop thinking. Stop thinking. Pieces of cold dripped from his armpits. He choked back a scream.

He had been born . . . *mature!*

Something had gone wrong with their plans. He knew more than he was supposed to know. They wanted him coming to a world with which he was not familiar. They wanted him in these clothes at this hour. The thoughts built themselves to a frenzy pitch within him, and suddenly were gone.

Who were . . . *they?*

There was nothing in his mind to answer. He rushed across the room, beating on the gray walls. They remained cold, unmoving. He ran back into the room where the gray column stood. The bin was still empty.

"Who are they?" he roared. His hands closed on the hilt of the sword, yanking it free. He yelled again, "Who are they?"

The crystal screen spelled out its blinking bleeding answer.

No information. No information. No information.

Hatefully he smashed down with the sword. There was a blue popping hiss and the screen broke into a thousand chiming pieces.

He examined the original room. His nostrils recoiled at the pungent life-smell.

Jackrogue raced back into the window room. The red star was a gnarled and puckered bloodclot dropping away below him. Two other planets wheeled above him, bathed in the red radiance.

And directly ahead was a third world, larger than the other two, rapidly swelling as the ship sped unerringly toward it.

Jackrogue was himself. Jackrogue was not a pawn. A new factor entered the pattern.

Jackrogue felt rebellion.

He figured carefully, oblivious to the sphere rushing to meet the ship. They wanted him at a particular point on that world, but he did not intend to be there. Therefore, only one solution.

Feeling the muscles cord in his arms, he began to hack and chop at the banks of machinery. Dials broke, metal sheared away under the bite of the iron blade. The wall spilled out its shining insulated guts.

Jackrogue felt the ship lurch.

He noted that the planet seemed to change its position slightly beyond the window, and he knew that the ship had shifted. He would arrive on the world, but the angle was widening. He would arrive at a different point from the one originally scheduled.

Satisfaction for Jackrogue as an individual of free will crept over him. He smiled grimly at the twisted entrails of the machines, and leaned against the window. The planet was a great mass of scarlet luminescence under him. He made out continents, then one continent, then mountains and rivers and finally red-bathed woodlands.

He was unaware of the whining shriek that was rising from the tortured hull of the ship.

With its gravitational brakes shattered, it plunged down and down at tremendous speeds.

At the last instant, Jackrogue felt something to be wrong. Impotently, he rushed to the tangled instruments.

The world exploded under him in a singing mass of whirling sharp fragments. He felt his sword slide from his hand, and labored to hold it.

And then he was plunged back into the darkness from which he had been so recently born.

Of course, he thought as he

felt his mind swim dimly up from unconsciousness, if they wanted me for a purpose, if they put me on the ship, they would make my body as strong as possible. I can't be dead. Death is remembering nothing, thinking nothing.

This time he did not open his eyes as soon as he got control of them. He let his senses record. The only thing he could feel was roughness, coarseness, hardness under his buttocks.

He opened his eyes.

An old man in a short sleeved jacket and baggy trousers was sitting on a chair, as he was. The old man had white hair with a wispy black "V" in the middle. He held some type of tubular weapon in his hand, pointed at Jackroque. The sword rested on his knees.

Jackroque saw a window behind the old man. There was a city, with tall slender buildings thrusting up into a pink twilight. The burnished ball of a red moon hung just over an aerial highway where small cylindrical vehicles moved.

He was seated on a rough chair of severely functional design. The rest of the furniture in the room was useful, unattractive. Jackroque saw that there were several cuts on his arms and legs that were already healed.

"I'm going to kill you, you know," the old man said suddenly. His eyes jumped under the frosty eyebrows and his tongue licked at a pale mustache.

"How did I get here?" Jackroque said.

"They said you would come back."

He sat up alertly. "Who are they?"

The old man chuckled nastily. "Everyone knows that. Nine thousand years is a long time . . ."

"Nine thous . . ." The words choked off in his throat. The old man must be insane!

"I was driving from Steeltown when I saw the rocket fall. The decelerators must have been faulty. I stopped and went into the field to see if anyone was alive. You were crawling through a hole in the plating, holding your sword, in a half-coma. I was frightened at first, but they said you would come. You were here, and I had you. I took you to the mobile and brought you here, to my home. I don't care how they did it. Even if you are a god and the rest of the people will worship you, you're still part of . . . them. All I want is to kill you."

"Tell me who I am," he said harshly.

"Jackroque," the old man replied simply.

"Won't you tell me any more?"

"You don't need to be told any more," the old man said, "to die."

Jackrogue watched the sky darken, watched the moon rising like a child's red rubber ball over the towers where lights began to flicker.

"Then tell me why you're going to kill me."

"You tell me," the old man answered, standing up quickly. The sword clattered on the plastic floor. "Why did you ever have to leave Earth? Why couldn't you have stayed there? Or at least, when you reached Antares, why did you have the desire to go on? I can't explain it. I only hate you for it."

"I don't understand you," Jackrogue said.

"No, I suppose you don't." Mockery bit deep through the still, dim room. "The Franchises for you and the other Barons have made us creeping spineless slugs for nine thousand years. No ambition, no will. And now, at last when we finally begin to throw off the lethargy, you come back. Well, no one will ever see you. It will be safer that way. Jarog will have her chance."

"What is that word, Jarog?"

The man was puzzled for a moment, shaken. "You don't know?"

"I don't."

"That is the name of this planet, the only inhabitable one in this solar system." He shook his head and rubbed one hand over the black "V" in his hair. "I can't comprehend the whole thing. They said you would come back, but you don't seem to know anything of this world . . ." He could find no answer to the problem, so he turned once again to his hatred.

"Get on your feet," he ordered.

Jackrogue stood up. This meant permanent blackness. But he had a burning will to live, to find out about the god statement, to find out why he had been born, and how, and a thousand other minor questions, all singing forceful and insistent within his brain.

In an instant, Jackrogue learned self-preservation.

His foot slid forward along the floor, catching the sword, carrying it upward with the force of his kick. The blade struck the old man's hand. He dropped the tubular weapon, whining.

Jackrogue scooped up the sword and thrust it against the old man's wrinkled neck.

"Now, Tell me about myself."

The old man peered at him, half of his face in shadow, half tinted pink from the moon beyond the window. His eyes began to fill with tears.

"I suppose I always knew I would be powerless against a god. Nine thousand years is a long, long time. But I hope you do not win."

His voice whispered off into silence.

"Tell me..." Jackroque began again.

The old man took one step forward.

And the blade slid through his neck and came out at the base of his brain, dripping.

Jackroque pulled it free, watching the old man crumble and sag into an ancient heap upon the floor. He felt pity, sadness at destroying a human being, even though the old man had wanted to kill him.

But he was in a room, and outside was a city. A new problem. A dangerous one.

He left the old man in the middle of the floor because he did not know what else to do with him. He searched for a door and found it. A long hall stretched away. He padded down it silently and pulled open the door at the end, sword in hand.

There was a large shed-like room filled with the cylindrical vehicles he had seen on the aerial highway. He walked along a platform, down a few steps, and selected one.

It was a one-seat affair with

a slanting dash panel, a large blue button in the center, and a wheel. He pulled the cockpit up and climbed inside.

He felt fear in his belly, but he knew that he had to go on, had to keep looking until he found the secret of his being. It involved strange names . . . Earth . . . Antares . . . the Franchises . . . the Barons . . . and nine thousand years.

He hesitated, and pressed the blue button.

The vehicle slid smoothly forward. The wall moved aside, and he was on a ramp that led upward to an aerial highway.

The city spread out below him. The mobile was easy to guide, and the traffic was light, so he examined the panorama of brilliance and beings. They were like him. But there were others . . .

Jackroque discovered women, and it was a strange and decidedly pleasant discovery. The people were dressed in clothing much as the old man had worn. He sensed that his vest and boots were somewhat outdated. But they had been in the ship, part of the purpose . . .

Searchlights threw modulating color upon the tall towers. The sky was completely dark now, lit only by the swollen moon and the stars. He felt cool air fan

his face as the mobile moved through the traffic.

He realized that he had to take definite steps.

There was a small roadside cubicle up ahead. A man in what resembled a uniform stood just inside, talking to someone on a crystal screen.

Jackrogue pulled over into a deserted lane, and then into the lane next to the cubicle. He pressed the blue button again, experimentally. He sighed with relief as the mobile slid to a halt.

The officer came out.

"Tell me," Jackrogue said slowly, keeping well back in the shadow of the mobile cockpit, "where is the most important place on Jarog?"

The officer replied without hesitation, "Imper City."

"How . . . how do I get there?"

"Straight ahead to the first cutoff, turn right and take the through lane. You can make it by dawn."

Jackrogue reached for the blue button. Light glared in his eyes.

"You a stranger? Everybody knows . . ." There was a gagging noise. "Christus . . . Jackrogue . . ."

Savagely, Jackrogue jammed his finger on the button. The mobile shot away from the tiny house.

He turned once, his cheek

quivering in nervous terror. The officer was gesturing wildly to other mobilists. He could see the man's mouth working in spastic amazement.

"Jackrogue . . . Jackrogue . . . I saw Jackrogue . . ."

The mobile shot on. He looked straight ahead. Imper City by dawn.

The mobile screamed around the cutoff and away from the city. Under the night, Jackrogue drove toward the secret of his being.

Nine thousand years . . . and something about a god . . .

There was no means by which to reckon time. There was only the endless flat rushing of the mobile tires on the dark highway, the sudden gusts of other lighted mobiles passing. The mobiles were filled with two, sometimes three and four people. Jackrogue watched them rush by, enviously. They were beings with backgrounds, whole histories in their minds. They were beings who knew how they had been created. They also knew in a fashion why: male and female had mated. Jackrogue did not even have that satisfaction.

You shouldn't know about male and female, his brain kept nagging. You shouldn't question. But he did question, because he knew dimly that he was not according

to the pattern arranged by . . . *they*.

His hands turned the wheel mechanically, and lighted towns fell away below him, golden chunks of warmth lost suddenly in the never-never land of the rolling dark. His only companion was the fatbellied red moon.

But suddenly he was no longer alone.

Green signal lights on a small rocket flier winked on and off just above and to the left of his mobile. He drove steadily, wondering why the lights were there.

And then he knew. Someone followed.

Magnetic grapples descended from the ship like round suckers on chains. He heard them smack-clank against the mobile roof. He jabbed the button, lips peeled back in instinctive fear.

The tiny mobile jerked spasmodically. The grapples held it. He took his finger off the button. The motor cut out. There was only the whine of the wind, a coughing rumble of small jets, and the sound of the tire. He could do nothing. They were towing him.

Were *they* in the flier the same as *they*, the creators?

He noticed that the rocket was on the right side of the car now. Overhead lights bathed a cutoff just ahead in fey blue radiance. He felt the tires turn as the

grapples swung the weight of the car.

Clenching his hand around the sword hilt, he waited. The rocket veered and the tires shrieked around the curve, spiraling downward. The rocket darted under the highway roadbed and swung out over a secluded level area. Farther on, the road spiraled down again and was lost in the night of the yellow towns.

The mobile was jerked upward and the tires sloughed free of the pavement. They whirled and whispered silently in the air for a moment, and then stopped turning.

Chains braked. The mobile was set down with a bump.

Abruptly, Jackrogue scrambled out of the car and stood looking up at the rocket, shadowy against the blackness of the highway far above. Dim blue lamp poles cast fantastic long shadows around great supporting columns. The green signals on the ship went out. The jets coughed redly one last time and died. The rocket hung steady against the force of gravity.

Jackrogue swallowed, slinking back into the shadow of a pillar. His blade came out, shining silver.

And a door on the rocket clanked open.

A figure was there, shrouded

in a long cape. Jackrogue could see a large white R standing out from the cloak with ghostly radiance.

A beam of light came from the figure in the door above him. He cringed back when it fell on him, holding his futile sword.

"Jackrogue," said a voice. He realized it did not belong to a man. "Come with us and do not make trouble. It will be safer that way."

"Who are you?" he snarled. "Why do you want me?"

"I was sent," the voice said quietly, "to take you to your creators."

He almost dropped the sword. He tried to speak, but managed only a dry rasping cackle.

There was a faint hum and the small dark ship lowered. Jackrogue saw opaque shining ports, and large windows at the front through which he could see two cloaked pilots watching him with curious wonder.

The light went out. "Will you come without force?" the woman asked.

He nodded wearily and slid the blade back in its sheath.

His steps were sodden, but his mind teemed with anticipation. Here, then, was the beginning of the solution . . .

He put his hands on the metal port and pulled himself up. It abut behind him loudly. Light

flooded over him. The jets began to rock and roar. There was again a feeling of motion.

The girl in the cloak marked with the white R motioned him to a row of large shock chairs. He sank down into one, and felt soothing fibrous fingers begin to massage his weary skin.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

"My name is Elva," she replied. He saw dark hair, a small mouth, brown eyes. She was the first woman he had seen closely, and so to him she would remain forever the most wonderful of them all.

"What do you know about me?" he wanted to know, sensing the almost futile stupidity in his endless questions to everyone he met.

"You are Jackrogue. A highway guard back at Textile City saw and recognized you. Word flashed around Jarog in less than an hour that you had come back. There were torchlight demonstrations in half a dozen cities. Some sympathizers were killed. Two in New Callisto were hanged from lamp poles. There was financial panic in thirty minutes. You are very important," she finished. Her voice was full of pity. "I am sorry for you."

He stood up. There was a horrible ache in his temples. "But who," he shouted, "is looking for me? Who sent you?"

She gazed at him, still with pity, not replying. He breathed harshly for a moment. "I didn't mean to speak like that," he mumbled, not knowing exactly why, knowing only that this woman called Elva was new and infinitely desirable.

"We traced you on the highway by means of crossbar grids. We have orders to bring you to Imper City, to the House."

He sighed. The House. The House was a name, a tangible thing.

"Could you tell me what the House is?" he said.

"Certainly, although I don't understand why you don't know. The House is the House of Rogue. The House of Rogue rules this planet, Jarog. The House of Rogue was founded nine thousand years ago by Jackson Rogue."

"It's confusing," he said, sitting down again. He squeezed his eyelids together and opened them. "The names . . ."

And then his lips parted ever so slightly. The brushes moved to and fro over his body, relaxing, relaxing. But they could not stop the thing that was on fire on his mind . . .

Jackson Rogue . . . from that to Jackrogue. Jackrogue established the House of Rogue which ruled the planet. He established

it nine thousand years before. There had been a prediction that he would return.

But . . . nine thousand years? Instinctively his mind recoiled. He had no memories. But would anyone remember nine thousand years in the stars? Would there be any thoughts left alive in all that time? He had scarcely been alive at all, and he felt that he was not Jackson Rogue of nine thousand years ago. He was . . . something . . . someone else . . . a new entity.

Jackrogue. But the second Jackrogue.

And most important, why?

"Please," he started to say, "please tell me . . ."

Elva shook her head, gesturing in the air. He listened. There was no sound. The ship settled.

Elva moved to him, put her hands on his chest. They were cool and trembling. "I am a servant of the House," she murmured, "but I believe that we should have the chance to stand alone, without our rulers. Help us . . . give us that chance . . ."

His mind was befuddled, thick, turgid. He touched her hair.

"I love you," he said in bewilderment. "I have just learned I love you. Is that . . ." He avoided her eyes. ". . . is that stupid?"

"No," she replied softly. "If you do not help them, whoever

you are and wherever you come from, you will find me . . ."

"Elva . . ." he said haltingly.

The port clanged open behind him.

"You must go," she whispered. "The House of Rogue is waiting."

He pressed her hand clumsily and jumped from the port. Turning for one final look at her, he saw the ship port close swiftly, cutting her off. Cutting her off . . . finally?

The green lights around the port went out.

He turned around.

It was a long corridor, high and wide, and dripping with some soft white light. From somewhere echoed a muted roaring, as of many human voices lifted up to the stars.

At the far end of the hall, two mighty black doors began to open.

Sweat dribbled down his chest, onto his stomach. He took hold of the sword hilt and began to walk. His boots rattled on the floor with empty echoes.

And he could not control himself. He walked faster and faster, elation and fear strangely mixed and singing in his brain. The doors swung wider and wider.

The boots drummed.

The mighty doors were Jackrogue and nine thousand starlit years unfolding, Earth and An-

tares and the Barons and the Franchises, the secret of life, and the great thundering they.

He pulled out his sword and walked between the mighty doors.

They closed behind him, too silently.

What was horror, wondered Jackrogue. Was this horror? Two people, a man and a woman. The man gross and bald and shrewd of eye. The woman austere and proud in a long gown, with white hair piled high on her head. A man who devised the means, a woman who planned the end.

Could this be a setting for horror? A great shadowed room with a long table at which the two were seated, and immense windows, and far down below in a square, endless throngs of people who waved torches in a mad flaming snake dance and shouted over and over and over, "Jackrogue . . . Jackrogue . . . Jackrogue . . ."

He tensed, advancing to the table. The man and the woman surveyed him. The ceiling wavered with flame shadows. He asked his question, for the last time.

"Who are you?"

"I am Allysyn Rogue and this is my brother Vincent," the woman said. "Sit down."

"No. I will stand. You will explain everything."

"Nine thousand years ago," the woman said rapidly, "man began to explore and colonize the stars from his mother planet Earth. He operated under the guidance of the Solar Colonial Council, which financed colonies on Mars and Venus. Then the first ships reached other star systems and new worlds were discovered. Colonization spread."

"But it was expensive," the fat man put in suddenly, "fantastically expensive, to a mind-shattering degree. Our ancestor, the first Jackson Rogue, had wealth. He came to the second planet of the Antares group and made a bargain with the Solar Council."

"They could afford no more colonizations. But he would choose a star system, finance colonization with his money, transport humans there, provided the Council granted him and his descendants Franchise as exclusive rulers and controllers of life in the new colony."

"The words come back," Jackrogue whispered. "Antares, and the Franchises. They come back."

Allyayn Rogue nodded, as if tired. "Other rich men took up the idea, each founding his own colony. They were the Barons of Space, absolute rulers of their particular world. Jarog became the world of Jackson Rogue.

"Nine thousand years have gone by, and all the other Barons have fallen. Their colonies stand alone. The people have matured, have become able to govern themselves. Only on Jarog do the Barons still rule. We are the last of the line, and now the people want their independence. They no longer have to look to us for everything. Our financial resources are largely gone. We needed some great psychological weapon to bring back their loyalty."

"And I," Jackrogue said slowly, hearing the voices lifted down in the burning square, "am your weapon."

"Precisely." The fat man scratched his belly under his tunic. "The people still hold a fanatical worship for the original Jackson Rogue. He is their legend, their god. So we contrived to make a new Jackrogue, announcing that he would reappear as a sign of our right to rule. I have long worked in embryology and memory-formation, and I developed the Rogue Ovoplasmic Technique. Your birth ship was built in outer space. An egg and sperm with selected specialized gene patterns were united, and you were placed in the artificial placenta-life fluid to mature. We left the ship outside our system and returned

here. Your maturity was rapidly accelerated, and when it was complete, the ship's motors were automatically started, to carry you back here to us. When you awoke, pre-conscious memory patterns we had planted came to life. And because of the gene selection scheme I had worked out, you would look exactly like Jackson Rogue of nine thousand years ago."

"There is no more to say," the woman finished. "You are Jackroque. We want our power and you will help us. That is why you were born." Her eyes flickered carefully, dangerously. "You were born for no other purpose but to help us. Those down there will listen to you."

"What if I won't help you?" Jackroque asked.

"But you will!" Her gaze was incredibly ancient, yet fierce, insistent. "You were born for no other purpose! You were born to help us. We created you in that mold! You can do nothing but that for which you were created!"

He felt downcast, lonely, and completely at an end. This was the purpose. They had made him. They . . .

He sucked in his breath, and freedom exploded in his head.

"But you made a mistake," he breathed. "*You made a mistake!*"

Vincent Rogue laughed. "I told

you, Allysyn. I told you gene patterns could not be perfectly controlled. When the ship did not land here as scheduled, I knew there was some unforeseen variable present. We aren't the ultimate creators. He has independence, free thought."

"Christus damn you, Vincent," she said, her bony blue hands shaking on the table, her mountainous hair tottering.

"Just like the first God," Vincent Rogue said. "We made a creature who was imperfect and could turn from our plan. The fall of Adam who tasted the forbidden fruit of knowledge because we could not control completely his mind and memories . . ."

"You have no wealth, no power, no weapon," Jackroque said. "I am free."

The old woman stared at the table. "I knew we would fail," her brother said laughingly. "I knew we had to fail. You hoped he would not remember that he was not born in the pattern . . . but he remembered . . ."

"I am going to live my life," Jackroque said. "How do I leave here?"

"The stairway," Vincent Rogue said, pointing to a darker alcove in the dim room. "The stairway, down to the people . . ."

Jackroque turned to leave.

"Wait," said the woman. It

was the imperative command of a dying queen. She both accepted and refused defeat in the one word.

"Leave us your sword," Allysyn Rogue said calmly.

He tossed it to them. The blade skittered across the table like quick-silver lightning. Her hand closed firmly on the hilt.

He stopped once, hearing a man's scream, fat and slobbering, whirl upward and then tear off. There would be, he knew surely, no sound from the woman.

The stairs led through another alcove into a large marble hall. Across the hall were more doors, this time transparent.

Jackrogue breathed proudly, put the palm of one hand against each of the doors, and pushed outward.

The people began to scream and claw at one another. Torches danced and jumped, sending sooty worms to stain the moon.

He stood on broad stone steps leading down to the mass of humanity in the square. They roared his name again and again, and the sound beat at him like tangible waves of force.

He screamed for them to be silent. He screamed until his lungs ached and his arms were heavy from gesturing. At last, the noise died out across the square in a rippling that washed

away from him, away and away, until even the farthest corners of the crowd were quiet.

"I am a new Jackrogue," he shouted, "not the old one reborn. The rulers are dead. You are free of them, no longer dependent. Do with your lives whatever you want. I am going to live among you. I belong to no one. I . . ."

His hand clutched out to hold onto a stone pillar. There was a face. She watched him, proud and happy, even as she unfastened a black cloak and dropped it, symbol of a dead way of life.

In another moment he was in the crowd, fighting his way through, tearing and battering. Hands crushed at him, pulled at him, longed to touch him. Voices screamed his name in a frenzy of freedom and adulation.

And then, she was against him and his arms were around her.

The sound of his name was a great roar that shook the towers of Imper City. The torches blazed like funeral pyres for the dead House of Rogue, and triumphant beacons of the new liberated men.

Everything seemed to spin about him. The soft body in his arms was the only steady factor.

In that mad world of noise and flame and lights and thunder, the second Jackrogue knew suddenly the reason for his birth.

THE HATERS

BY WILLIAM MORRISON

They flung themselves across light years of space to show the world their hatred and contempt. And out among the stars, they learned at last what hatred could really mean to them and what they hated!

"We'll show them," said Kerman.

Grayson didn't answer. Kerman was more than half crazy, and he had been talking about showing them ever since coming on board. Grayson had got used to him; just as he had got used to all the others. After all, you couldn't expect to hire a crew that was exactly normal, not for a trip like this. You simply picked up what you could get and took these characters in your stride, and when they started talking in their different peculiar ways, you didn't pay attention.

Still, if ever Kerman's remark had been appropriate, it was at a time like this. Here was a

planet that would have everything they were looking for. And nobody to stop them from taking it.

McGant, who acted as first mate, came over to him and said, "We're all set to land, Captain."

"Hold off for awhile," replied Grayson. "I'm checking our observations."

"There's nothing to check," commented McGant sourly. "Oxygen, temperature, gravity, air pressure—everything's in the right range. Radioactivity's a little high, but that's the way we want it. Not enough to hurt, but high enough to be promising."

"I'm not sure about the inhabitants," Grayson said.

McGant looked at him oddly. You didn't get respect from a crew like this, thought Grayson. Some were slavish, but in general you were lucky if you got grudging obedience, and didn't have to dodge a knife in the back. McGant, now, was not exactly half crazy, but he was a good quarter of the way gone. And here he was looking at Grayson as if he considered the latter the one who was weak in the head. Maybe he had something there at that, thought Grayson.

"There's no danger from them," said McGant. "Only one intelligent species, and not many specimens of them around. And they're still in the ape-man stage."

"I'm not so sure."

"By Pluto, Captain, it's obvious enough. Not a building, not a boat, not a canal in the place. No sign that they've ever heard of the use of tools. No sign that they grow their own plant food or use weapons to kill their prey. What more do you want of them, an I. Q. test?"

"That would help," said Grayson. "For lack of it, I'm taking another look at some of those telescopic films we made."

"I've gone through them. They don't show any danger."

"I tend to agree with you. But it doesn't pay to be careless."

"Anything you say, Captain," replied McGant in a respectful voice, managing to convey his contempt by facial expression alone. "Somebody on every ship has to be careful, just as somebody has to be the ship's clown. But I'll lay two to one that you're only wasting our time. An hour from now we'll be coming in for the landing we should be making right now."

"I don't doubt it," returned Grayson coldly. He didn't like that remark about the clown.

"And then, by Pluto, we'll start collecting the stuff. We'll show the dirty so-and-so's, Captain."

"You have restricted objectives," said Grayson. McGant's dirty so-and-so's, of course, were the inhabitants of his native Mars. Kerman's "them" were the officers of the Interplanetary Transport Service, who had fired him for perfectly justifiable reasons.

Grayson himself wasn't so petty. The "them" that he was going to show was nothing less than the entire human race.

He studied the films, running them through three more times, looking for any clue that might hint at an advanced but concealed state of civilization, for any sign that the intelligence of the highest race, the A-race, was above what he called the ape-

man stage. There was nothing.

The intelligent ones were not particularly impressive-looking. They were about five feet high, rather slender in build, and not at all humanoid in appearance. They looked like walking lizards, which they were not. Their jaws protruded and their foreheads receded, as if they relied more upon their teeth than upon their brains. And Grayson had learned that in an enemy you had to fear brains more than anything else.

Completely sane or not, McGant was right. After an hour, Grayson gave the signal, and the ship spiralled in for a landing. It settled down on a smooth grassy plot that was red and gray with small growing plants.

They got out, their weapons ready, and looked around them. There was nothing startling, and Grayson wondered why he couldn't shake off the feeling of danger. The plants were unusual, of course, but no more unusual than those of a planet like Venus, for instance. Tall gray trees, red and gray bushes, blue grass. They were fixed where they grew, as plants should be, and Grayson saw no reason to fear them. Still, tests had to be made.

A couple of the men, directed by McGant, were already gathering samples to make them. They took specimens of the air, the soil, they took the leaves and

bark of different plants. In the ship itself, Stratton, the biochemist, who was a very kindly and gentle person except when he took a notion that the Universe was persecuting him, fed the materials through the electronic-chemical tester system. This read off their important characteristics in no more than the time that a human analyst would have taken to focus a microscope.

"No poisons and no very bad skin irritants," he reported, "except on one of the larger species of trees, and I don't think there'll be much trouble, Captain, in getting an antitoxin to control that. Some of the grasses produce mild allergens, but our drugs should handle them."

No danger from that source then. As for the animals—Grayson heard the click of a gun going off, and saw a blue animal leap out of the grass and lie still. Kerman and a couple of others were assembling specimens of the larger species. Another crew was collecting the planetary equivalent of insects. Soon they would get together numerous representative types of animal life, study how the creatures reacted, find out how easy they were to kill. Another electronic analyzer would dissect them and report all their important characteristics to the waiting men.

An hour later, the summarized reports began to come in. By the end of the afternoon, a hundred small species and a dozen of the larger ones had been analyzed. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew had not been idle. Under Grayson's direct orders, a dozen of them were scouting at low levels in their one-man helicopters. If the planet was as rich in the different metals as it seemed to be, they should have located enough ores to make fortunes for the entire crew in a single day of mining.

When the reports began to come in over the radio, Grayson knew that he was right. Their fortunes would be made.

"We'll show them," grinned Kerman, almost drooling at the idea of the money he was going to have.

This time Grayson nodded. He dreamed of what the money would do for him, and the bitter smile he habitually wore slowly hardened. What a showing that was going to be.

They operated on a twenty-four hour day, although the period of rotation of the planet was closer to thirty. It was still dark when the morning wake-up bell out and began to get the mining sounded, and the men tumbled

machinery ready for operation. A technician, relatively sane but surly, tested the electron filters in banks, replaced one that was faulty, gave the mechanical parts a quick once-over, and reported, "Shipshape, Captain."

"Start mining." Grayson had made a map, showing the different ore-rich areas listed in the preceding day's explorations. He pointed out Area 1 and said, "Try that first."

The man nodded. "Could use more equipment."

"We'll get along this trip. And next trip we'll have enough equipment to go ten times as fast."

The 'copter with the mining group flew into the surrounding darkness, its glowlights lighting up the trees for a distance of a thousand feet ahead. Things were settling down to a routine, thought Grayson. Everything quiet, everything in order, Absolutely no danger.

McGant came out of the inside of the ship and grinned at him. "No trouble, Captain?"

"None so far."

"It's like I expected. That A-race isn't dangerous at all. And as for brains—well, they've got just enough to keep out of our way."

"We didn't run across any yesterday?"

"There don't seem to be many

around. One of the men came across a single specimen. He shot at it, but the thing was quite a way off, and he missed."

"Tell the men not to kill them. We'll see if we can tame them and get some use out of them."

But he wasn't actually counting on that. It was enough, he told himself, to know that the A-race was harmless. From now on, the only thing that counted was the rate at which the metal could be mined and brought to the ship.

All the same, he experienced a feeling of uneasiness later, when he overheard two of the men talking. One of them was jeering. "Don't tell me you missed him, Fernald. Why, I thought you could hit a target with that gun of yours from ten miles away."

"I can. But I'm not used to the air here, and my range-finder doesn't work the way it does on Earth or Mars."

Then the two men became aware that Grayson was near them, and they slouched to attention and saluted sloppily. What did the man miss? Grayson asked himself. An animal at which he was shooting, of course. But what sort of animal? One of the A-race?

Discipline was bad enough without letting the men know that he had overheard part of

their conversation and wanted to hear the rest of it. He passed by them, and noticed that they returned talking in low voices when he was out of earshot.

The incident annoyed him, and the next day he himself went out with one of the hunting parties. The animals had learned caution now, and were in no hurry to show themselves. One of the men had to flush them out of their hiding places with a strong ultrasonic beam, which he swept in all directions, and even then they moved so swiftly that they were not easy to kill. By the time you aimed at them they had changed color and taken refuge in their next hideout. And then you had to go through the whole process all over again.

It was an hour before Grayson himself got a shot. When he did let loose finally it was at a small lizard-like animal only a foot high, that came placidly out of a burrow thirty feet away and stood there, as if oblivious of the irritation of the ultrasonic beam, examining the men with interest.

Grayson's blast had more power in it than he would have wanted to use on so small a creature. It caught the lizard full in the middle, and knocked it back. For a moment Grayson was afraid that he had torn the thing to pieces.

He hadn't. As he watched in

amazement, the animal picked itself up, completely unhurt, and moved slowly into its burrow again.

One of the men laughed uneasily. "You didn't catch it head on, Captain. You just sideswiped it."

Grayson said firmly, "I hit it head on."

"Besides," said another of the men, "even a glancing shot with that much power should have killed it."

"It should have," agreed Grayson. "Has anybody here killed one of these things before?"

"I aimed at one yesterday, Captain, but I missed."

It was Fernald who spoke. Captain Grayson said sharply, "Sure you missed?"

"Not now I ain't, Captain. But I thought so at the time."

"Prentiss," said Grayson, "flush that thing out with the ultrasonic beam again. I want another look at it."

The ultrasonic beam rose to full power. Nothing came out of the burrow.

Grayson's forehead was damp. He said, "Somebody toss a grenade down there. That should get it out, in pieces if need be."

They stepped back and Fernald tossed the grenade. Fernald liked to toss grenades. The clumps of dirt shot up and out in all directions, and left a hol-

low a dozen feet across. At the bottom of the hollow they could see the small lizard looking up at them. It seemed annoyed that its privacy had been disturbed, but otherwise not particularly upset. Grayson stared at it more closely than before. The thing helped him by standing up on its hind legs so that he could get a better look at it.

The jaws protruded, the forehead receded. It looked like a small-scale, slightly altered edition of the members of the A-race. "Probably an earlier and smaller form," he thought. "It must have the same evolutionary relation to the A-race as monkeys have to men."

The thing looked at him and opened its jaws. Grayson heard the thinnest of squeaks. Most of the sound, he realized, must be in the ultrasonic range.

Another small lizard popped out of a burrow close by, and disregarding the presence of the men a couple of dozen feet away, the two things held a squeaky conversation. Then both turned and moved calmly into the second burrow.

"Want me to open that one up too?" asked Fernald eagerly.

"Don't bother." Fernald was too anxious. Better keep him under control, or he'd let his passion for throwing grenades get the better of him.

"I got something a little better than a grenade, Captain," said one of the other men. "Midget-sized nuclear bomb. We'll have to back up, though, if we want to use it."

"We'll try that," said Grayson.

The man moved cautiously to the burrow and planted the bomb. Then they all moved back. When the bomb went off, the explosion could be felt a half mile away. Dirt and rocks flew into the air, and with them the two small lizard things.

When the men approached once more, the two beasts had their heads together again, squeaking away as before. Apparently they had been unharmed by the explosion.

Grayson looked at his men and they looked back at him, and nobody spoke. Finally, Fernald, now no longer fingering a grenade, suggested, "There seems to be nothin' much we can do to those things, Captain. And it would be too bad if they came after us. Maybe we better leave them alone."

"I'm afraid we'd better. Back to the ship, every one."

He spoke calmly, but inside he wasn't at all calm. He had been right from the first, there was danger here, terrible danger. So far, by some miracle, the little lizards had shown no inclination to harm them. But what if the

bombing of their burrows had aroused their anger?

The next day he learned that the small lizards were not invulnerable.

They had set a trap a half mile from the ship, and when the alarm went off, Captain Grayson looked at the visor to see what he had caught. It was a big lizard this time, a member of the A-race. The thing stood on its hind legs within the smooth hard walls of transparent metal and gazed around it, as if wondering what had happened. It made no sudden motion, showed no sign of panic. It simply examined the situation in what seemed to Grayson a very human way.

Something moved at the edge of the visor screen, and Grayson perceived that a small lizard was inspecting its larger relative through the transparent metal wall. Half a dozen additional small lizards joined the first, and for a few seconds they stared placidly at the large creature inside the trap.

Then the large one acted. Its paws swiped at the metal wall, and the wall tore. A second later the large one was out of the trap, attacking the small creatures which surrounded it.

The walls must have caved in completely then, for the visor screen blanked out. Grayson swore in frustration, and then

barked, "McGant, Fernald! Get a couple of men with midget nuclear bombs and come with me! I want to see what's going on there!"

Two minutes later they were in a 'copter, flying over the place where the broken remains of the trap lay. McGant looked out and said, "All quiet now, Captain."

"We'll land and look around. You fellows keep your bombs ready for use. They don't seem to hurt the beasts, but at least they'll blow them out of the way."

As they eased the 'copter to the ground, Grayson sprang out and ran over to what seemed to be a torn rag. It was what was left of one of the small lizards. He stared at it in disbelief for a moment, aware that his heart was pounding with fear. He found it hard to believe.

Fernald said gloomily, "We couldn't make a dent on that thing, Captain, but the big one seems to have torn it to pieces in no time at all. Absolutely no time at all."

"What'll happen to us if the big one comes after us?" asked McGant.

Grayson shook his head. "Better not talk about it. So far we've been lucky enough to have it avoid us. God help us if it ever acquires a fondness for our company," he told them.

Fernald pointed. "Here's another little one, dead as a doornail. Looks like it's been burned."

The skin seemed to have been scorched. Grayson said, "That must be one of the pair we caught with our midget nuclear bomb."

"So the bomb had an effect after all," observed McGant.

"Not enough. If we had a full-sized one—"

"Which we haven't, Captain."

"Which we haven't. But if we had, we might protect ourselves. As it is—" He hesitated. "As it is, we're getting off this planet."

"No, Captain!" exclaimed McGant. "By Pluto, we were all going to get rich here and go back and show them. You can't go off now, leaving all that valuable metal untouched."

Grayson's lips tightened. "Into the 'copter, you fools," he ordered. "We're going back to the ship, and once we get there we're leaving the planet. If you don't like the idea, McGant, you can stay here with these lizard beasts. And you can keep any man who wants to stay here with you."

The others shook their heads, and Fernald spoke for them. "Not us, Captain. Not after what we've seen them do."

The flight back to the ship was made in swift silence. Grayson got out and saw Kerman gaping

foolishly at him. "All quiet, Kerman?"

"All quiet, Captain."

"Get back on the ship. Have Sparks send out a message recalling all reconnaissance and mining crews. We're leaving in fifteen minutes. Anybody not on board in that time stays behind on this planet."

He ran down the corridor and threw open the door to his office. In the doorway he stood as if paralyzed. One of the A-beasts was there near his desk, staring at him. A hole torn in the metal floor showed how the beast had entered.

His hand swung to the weapon at his belt and then dropped away. Explosive weapons were useless. The only thing that could save him was his head, his human brain, the great brain of a race which had set out to conquer the universe.

A crewman came running down the corridor to him and shouted, "Captain! They've torn a hole in the side! And they're ripping out the engine!"

Another A-beast suddenly opened the storeroom door and looked out at him. It was at this moment that Grayson almost realized the full hopelessness of their situation. But not quite. He knew that the ship could not take off without extensive repairs, and that he and the other

crew members were prisoners at the mercy of the A-race. What he did not realize was the most important fact of all.

There came the burst of an explosion from an adjoining corridor, then screams of panic. There must have been at least half a dozen guns blasting, thought Grayson. All, he knew, were useless, completely useless. Not one of them could harm the big lizard-like things. They could only excite them, enrage them, inspire them to revenge.

He peered around the corner and saw what was happening. Very gently, two of the A-race were advancing upon a dozen cowering crew members. Like nurses removing dangerous toys from children who might hurt themselves, they were taking away the guns and grenades which the latter had been using.

It was at that moment that the full truth burst upon Grayson. The A-beasts were not averse to killing. The way in which one of them had slaughtered the smaller creatures of his own planet showed that. If they were caring for the human beings it was for one reason alone—that the human beings were valuable to them, that the human beings knew things that they needed to know.

And if they could acquire

knowledge from the human beings, that meant that they themselves were intelligent, highly intelligent. That was the horrible truth, the stupendous danger that paralyzed Grayson's mind. His knees buckled under him, and he sank back against a wall and gasped for breath. For the first time since he had been released from prison, his fear for the human race was so great that he forgot his hatred of it.

The A-beasts were very intelligent jailers. To prevent the human beings from escaping they had removed the 'copter engines and retired, leaving the prisoners both their quarters and the weapons they needed to protect themselves against lower beasts. In addition, as protection against the smaller lizards against which the weapons had proved so useless, they had thoughtfully left two of their own kind as guards.

The guards picked out Grayson and Stratton, the biochemist, herded them gently into the captain's office, and began to question them.

They pointed to different objects and waited to hear the names. Very obediently, Captain Grayson began to teach them the human language.

"Shrewd," he told himself,

"very shrewd. They've picked us two as the most intelligent of the entire ship. They figured we'd make the best teachers. Well, harring a touch of insanity, we're not had."

The other man seemed to have been frightened out of his delusions of persecution. No delusions at this moment, thought Grayson, just the persecution itself. Stratton said nervously, "They have a good memory, Captain. They repeat the words we give them without making a mistake."

In fact, the A-creatures were learning to speak at a rapid rate. Grayson could not imagine himself learning their language with such speed and accuracy.

At the end of three days they could communicate with the human beings with a fair degree of fluency. One of the first questions they asked was further evidence of their shrewdness. "Why do you have such men?"

Stratton, with his delusions, naturally misunderstood. He began to explain, "All the men have different duties. One plots the ship's course, one takes charge of the engines—"

The A-beast said, "That is not what is meant."

Grayson nodded. "I think I understand. You want to know why I have such a peculiar crew.

But first, why do you think the men are peculiar?"

"There is not sufficient regularity. We do not know what the human norm is. But we do know that this cannot be a normal sample. There is too great a variety of behavior. Some are dull and apathetic, like Kerman, some are excitable, like McGant. There is both cowardice and reckless indifference to loss of life. Some obey slavishly, others carry out orders only as a last resort."

"A fine crew, aren't we?" agreed Grayson bitterly. "But for a trip like this, the bunch I picked was the best to be found."

"They are irrational. They hate. And they act upon their hatred."

"Yes, we hate. That is the one thing we have in common. McGant hates his native planet, which banished him for crimes he had committed. Kerman hates the Interplanetary Transport Service, which fired him for petty thievery. Fernald hates the Courts of Justice, which convicted his father of taking bribes. Some hate for reasons which exist in their twisted minds only. Others, like me, have good reason for hating the entire human race."

The two A-creatures exchanged glances. Grayson said angrily, "Don't look superior. If you

knew what they did to me, you'd understand. I was convicted for a murder I didn't commit. I was sent to a penal colony to be re-conditioned. After I had served ten years—the full period—they discovered the real murderer, who was by that time on his deathbed, and died thumbing his nose at them.

"Ten years out of my life—think of it!" His voice choked with rage as he recalled his wrongs. "The most precious ten years. They couldn't make it up to me, of course, but the thing was that they didn't even try. They didn't begin to try. They simply informed me that they'd note the correction in my dossier, and that I could go about my business as before, with no stain on my record."

He hadn't meant to speak so freely, but now that he had listeners, the temptation to go on was irresistible. And in the back of his mind was another reason, a reason only half formed. He would hold nothing back. Nothing, except—

"They forgot that they had re-conditioned me. When I entered the colony I was a reasonably normal human being. When I left it, I was—as you see me now. I hated every one. Almost the first thing I did was to square the account a bit. I had paid the customary ten years for

a human life, paid it in advance. I took what was coming to me by killing the most brutal of the guards. I felt better then, but I still hated people.

"While I was in the penal colony, the intergalactic drive had been discovered. But its use was prohibited indefinitely. The authorities reasoned that the other galaxies might be full of unknown dangers, and they didn't want to bring any of them down upon the Solar System. Intergalactic exploration was forbidden to all ships but official Government vessels, which were to be especially trained to take the necessary precautions."

• He grinned unpleasantly. "Personally I didn't give a damn whether I brought danger down upon the Solar System or not. All I knew was that there were hundreds of thousands of planets yet unexplored, and that they probably contained enough in raw materials to make fortunes for everybody in the first few thousand crews to explore them. I started recruiting a crew as fast as I could.

"As it turned out, I couldn't get even ordinary criminals to join up with me. They had too much of a sense of human responsibility, too much conscience. That's why I had to fall back on this outfit of haters. With them—and with me—it's

every man for himself, and devil take the hindmost."

"That was what we wished to know."

Again the two A-creatures exchanged glances, and Grayson thought he detected doubt. He had been telling the truth, for reasons of his own, of course, but the truth none the less. He said harshly, "If you don't believe me, ask the others. They'll tell you whether or not I'm lying. There's only one thing to add. That is, that we hadn't counted on coming across a race like yours. Now we'll never get back to our native planet to enjoy the wealth we found."

If he could only be sure of that! But perhaps they would get back. There was a good possibility. The ship's engines hadn't been destroyed, they had merely been removed. Perhaps the crew would yet return to the System and to the people they had so bitterly hated.

"We shall repair your ship. Perhaps we shall build several others like it. And you will lead us back."

It was as he had feared. Grayson stared at the two creatures and had a moment of panic. He hadn't told them that he had changed his mind about hating the human race. He hadn't told them that a man could think he knew his own mind, knew his

own dearest wish—and when face to face with its realization, perceive that he knew nothing of the sort. That was one thing he mustn't tell. Nor must he tell them that he was terrified now at the nightmare of what would happen when such almost invulnerable creatures descended upon the weak things that called themselves "men." And for a moment he was afraid that they would read his mind.

That, however, was absurd. If they could do that, they would never have bothered to ask him so many questions. His thoughts were his own—up to the point where his own cowardice would force him to reveal them.

But if they could not read his mind in the literal sense, they could at least judge what he was thinking. One of the A-creatures said, "You are wondering about us. We have no machinery such as fills your ship, we lack much of your science. How can we dream of building another ship?"

"Yes, I'm wondering. I don't understand your race in the least."

"We have only recently begun to understand ourselves." The creature said softly, "We are a young race. Those that look like us but are so much smaller, like the creatures you call lizards—those are our ancestors."

"I thought there was a relationship. But it doesn't make sense. Those small ones," objected Grayson, "are the only creatures we have seen you destroy."

"They are the only ones we have to fear," returned the other.

Not the only ones, thought Grayson. You have us—me. Yes, I hated the human race for what it did to me. It was a blind, reasoning hate, and some of its members deserved part of what I felt—but no one hurt me intentionally, no one but the murderer and the guard I killed, and both of these were themselves enemies of humanity. Now that I've got all that bitter stuff off my chest, I can see it more clearly. But I can realize too that even at my worst, I never intended to destroy my own kind. I might have subjected it carelessly to danger, just as a man will subject himself when he is overconfident of his own ability and careless of his own life. I wanted people to realize that I had been unjustly treated, I wanted them to fear my revenge. I would have come back with millions and lorded it over those who had harmed me, used my money to punish those in power who had treated me as a mere number on the list of prisoners.

But I never had any intention of bringing disaster to the Sys-

tem. And that is what I have done—what I shall have done in discovering you and your kind, unless I can stop you. I have no weapon now but my mind, my human mind which you unfortunately cannot read. And this mind I must use to the utmost to discover your weakness, to prevent you from fastening yourself upon my people and enslaving them, as I am afraid you will do if you attack before they are warned.

The A-beast said, "These small ancestors of ours are thoughtless, stupid. In the struggle for life upon this planet, however, they have had one advantage. In appearance they seem, as we do, little out of the ordinary. But no ordinary weapon can harm them, much less, destroy them. They do not even die of old age. They die only when they destroy each other.

"They must have been formed originally by some tremendous mutation of the germ plasma. Once in existence, they spread rapidly among creatures who by comparison were of a completely lower order of strength. It was not until they had covered the entire land surface of the planet that they began to come into serious conflict with each other, and thus to limit their own numbers.

"A few hundred thousand

years back, our own race first arose. It was distinguished at first only by its size. It had the same near-invulnerability and the same lack of intelligence.

"At first it was only a subspecies of the dominant, smaller race. But creature against creature, the smaller ones were helpless to combat it, and it grew in numbers. But the struggle for survival was a desperate one. Its members had to learn to band together, to hunt their enemies systematically and relentlessly. We learned to know, each of us, his own strength. We learned to recognize against what odds we could win and against what odds we must lose, and we developed our original language to a level that would permit us to work together.

"Thus we became the intelligent race you see today. In all this, however, we had no need to master nature as your own race has done. No ordinary enemy could hurt us, no weapon penetrate our bodies. There were no perils of nature against which we needed protection. Our only enemies were the smaller race, these we had begun to conquer by teeth and claws.

"In the past few years, our intelligence has turned the scale definitely in our favor. And this same intelligence has enabled us to foresee that in the future we

shall no longer be limited to the few square miles of land we now inhabit. In a few years, the entire planet will be ours. What then? We do not die when there is insufficient food, but we cease to grow and propagate. Shall our race be brought to a standstill for lack of space in which to expand?

"We had just begun to consider our problem when your ship arrived. You have given us the answer. Other planets, other galaxies would provide us with new homes. There remained only one question. Could we build such a ship as yours to conquer space?

"We studied you and your men and arrived at the conclusion that individual for individual we were immensely superior to you. Whatever you could do, we could do with greater ease. But you have a long start on us. We have therefore been careful to harm no one, even the least among you, you who have knowledge that we may use.

"On all the planets we conquer, we shall learn. It will not be long before we acquire the knowledge you yourself have gained over the course of your entire history."

And then—Grayson shrugged. "So long as it takes more than my lifetime, that is a matter of indifference to me."

He had had a great deal of ex-

perience in concealing his true feelings, and these creatures had known human beings for only a short time. Nevertheless he had a ghastly fear that they would see through him, that they would realize that he was lying, and had spoken so freely of his hate for the human race only because he no longer hated.

These creatures had brains that were superior, he thought desperately. They had learned the human tongue in a few days, but he had not the slightest idea of their own language. They were as grown men to children. And could a child successfully deceive a grown man in so important a matter?

He might, thought Grayson. Once in a while he might. If he pretended selfish indifference to anything but his own personal interests, if he pretended complete and unquestioning obedience, he might.

In the days that followed he realized that even his crew members, haters of their own kind though they were, felt guilty at the thought of their great betrayal. Among others, Kerman came to him and said uneasily, "Say, Captain, these lizards want us to tell them everything we know."

"You don't know much, Kerman," Grayson said.

"Yes, but Captain, there are some things—"

"Do as they want," said Grayson, knowing that his own attitude would be reflected in the more revealing attitude of the crewmen. "Don't volunteer information because that would be showing disrespect. But don't hold back when they ask you."

"But, goosh, Captain, they're lizards and we're people. And if they learn how to handle the ship, and make ships of their own—"

"What do we care? The only thing we're interested in is keeping alive, isn't it?"

Kerman nodded uncertainly.

"In that case, there's only one thing to do. Tell them what they want to know. Keep on the good side of them."

"Okay, Captain," said Kerman resignedly. "Now, they've been asking about all this metal we got stored on the ship. They figure that if we want it, it's valuable to them too. They want us to show them how to get more."

"Show them. I thought I heard you yourself say, Kerman, that we'll show them."

Kerman grinned shamefacedly. "I didn't mean it that way, Captain. I meant the people back in the System. But we'll show these lizards too."

We make good slaves, thought Grayson, perfect slaves. Fortu-

nately there is a bit of critical information that most of the men don't usually recall. I'll have to warn one or two of the technicians though, not to pass it on. As for the rest, we toil away with hand and brain, and day by day the A-race is learning most of the precious knowledge we have acquired, it is learning to work the machinery we have so painfully built. An invulnerable race can't be stopped, he told himself bitterly, it can't be harmed, and it can't be resisted.

You can only let them pick the treasures of your mind and take charge of the material treasures you came here to gather. Wonder if the human race will appreciate what I'm up against, he thought. Of course it will never know, but I wonder if it would appreciate if it did know.

Not likely. More likely every last one of them would damn me for what I've done. And they'd be right. I hated them, and I'm paying for my hatred. Strange that now I hate the A-race more. Here it is, concentrated in a few square miles around the ship, hemmed in by enemies on its own planet, prepared to play the role of galaxy-conqueror. If only there were time for a warning—

There wasn't. There was no time to spread the news, and even if there had been, there would have been no time for a

battle cruiser to arrive quickly enough to drop its atomic bomb and wipe out the core of the A-race.

Of course, if such a bomb could have been dropped—there would be the end of the ship that served the A-race as model, of the human beings who served them as teachers. Those of the A-race who had already acquired human knowledge would also be wiped out with them, and the scattered members left on the outposts would probably be helpless against the onslaughts of their smaller relatives.

A big *if*, an impossible *if*. Was it, though? If you toiled faithfully, if you got your men to work hard, and helped them concentrate and purify the precious metal, and collect it all in one spot, watching the quantity grow and grow, until—

He called his men together and they stood there silent. There they were, the surly ones, the crazy ones, all those who had felt persecuted, and hated their own kind.

"Men," he said, "you've been taking it too easy. Remember, the sooner we do what these lizards want, the sooner we go back to our own System." A lie, of course. They would never go back. "I want you to stop loafing and get a move on."

"And turn the System over to


these lizards? I'll see them in hell first. And you with them, Captain, you with them. Boys—"

"All right, boys," said Grayson genially. "Back to work. And remember, speed it up now."

And now the layers of metal bars filled a small chamber in the ship, and the precious hoard he had been so helpfully collecting was almost complete. Three heaps with a space in the center they were now, three heaps, each below the critical stage, but already warm with the neutrons streaming through their slowly disintegrating atoms. He held the last bar of U235 in his hand, and he knew that he had only to place it in the spot reserved for it to make the mass exceed the critical size, to turn it into a nuclear bomb, to make it explode suddenly in an atomic blast whose fierceness would vaporize ship and slaves and masters with a roar never before heard or imagined on this planet.

His face wore almost the same happy smile that had once amused him on Kerman's face. "We'll show them," he said cheerfully. "We'll show them."

But it was a smile without hatred. He put the bar into place, and everything was gone at once. Where there had been a ship and hatred there was now only a vast hollow in the molten ground.



THE IDOLS OF WULD

BY MILTON LESSER

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

The spacemen had enslaved the galaxy—but as long as men could feel sorry for their masters, who was to care? Only the raistering, wandering Scholars, such as Erak the Gaunt or the fire-and-ice figure of Narlo, who led him across the universe.





Erak the Gaunt entered Balore from the east, where the Street of Fishmongers met the sluggish Balore river. The winds of late winter chased each other through the narrow crooked streets, howling around corners and all the way out to the spacefield which was still covered with dirty patches of snow.

Erak chuckled as he made his way up the Street of Fishmongers and thence across a broad square toward the Avenue of Wines. Now, with the coming of the spring thaw the ships would come thundering out of the sky and their crews would drive hard bargains with the people of Balore. Briefly it entered his mind that there should be an eagerness in the streets of Balore to see again the men from the stars. The complete indifference could be attributed to the Rites and to the Idols, and Erak chuckled again, leaning heavily for a moment on his Scholar's staff.

As a Scholar he should study the Rites, and the people thought that he did. Yet the Scholars' function had changed completely, and no one had bothered to change the old laws which protected them. He remembered the woman in Nawk who wanted to sell him a dozen pickled navel strings for his study, the witchman in Fya who had concocted a mess with hair and spittle and

scrapings of skin and promised Erak it would be his key to the Rites . . .

The club whistled down out of the wind, striking Erak just above his right temple. He staggered and was aware of dropping his staff, and then he fell forward to hands and knees. He did not lose his senses, yet with an odd detachment he realized he hardly could move. He groped upward, half turned and caught the down-sweeping club on his forehead. The force of the blow threw him over on his back and he felt a strange lightness all over his head, except at his right temple, which throbbed.

Once more he tried to get up, clung without seeing to the legs of the man who had struck him. Then he pitched forward on his face.

Vapid, worrying faces looked down at him out of the gathering darkness, but Erak assured the little crowd he was all right. Stiffly, he got to his feet, staggered off into a doorway to protect himself from the fierce cold wind. A gray face or two peered in at him, curiously, not really friendly, but he waved them away with his hand.

He fumbled with his pouch and opened it, felt the score of Wuldian dols. Strange—what had the man taken? Further searching revealed that his

Scholar's disc was gone, the neatly inscribed gold coin, twice the size of a dol, which he had received in Nawk. And the big staff had not been on the ground beside him.

His Scholar's disc and Scholar's staff, these the man had taken. Why? Why but to impersonate a Scholar! The man could get away with it, too—no additional identification would be required. But Erak frowned. He could not understand why anyone would want to impersonate a member of the Society of Scholars. You only became an knocclast out of direct choice, and few people wanted to. Of course, the life was a romantic one which appealed to a certain insecure and usually young segment of the population. Aside from that the man's reason must remain a mystery. And unless the man walked up to him one fine day and admitted it, Erak would never learn the identity of his attacker.

Erak the Gaunt shrugged and set out again along the Avenue of Wines. Soon he found the tavern of Red Natin, where Teedin of Nawk told him it would be. He climbed the three steps, pushed open the door, breathed gratefully the smell of wine and soft wood smoke which hung heavy on the evening air.

Noise and laughter filled the room and people turned briefly from their tables to look at him, but Erak strode across the room to a door at its far end. He opened it, stepped within, closed the door behind him.

The five within the inner chamber looked at him queerly. He had no staff. Besides, Erak the Gaunt was a towering figure of a man, tall and fair and rapier thin, with deep smouldering eyes which still held traces of anger within them. Now he warmed himself at the fire, aware that the hum of conversation had been cut, as by a knife, at his entry.

"I am called Erak the Gaunt by the Society of Scholars in Nawk," he said.

One man looked him up and down keenly, smiled. "I can readily see why, Erak the Gaunt. You have your disc, of course." The man could have been forged only in a cauldron of hell, which, as the Rites will tell you, lies far to the south in the broiling equatorial regions of Wuld. The top of his fire-red shock of hair hardly came to Erak's shoulders. His lips twisted into a little smile which Erak thought a permanent one, as was the reckless gleam in his eyes. His shoulders seemed big enough for two of him, a yard across, and hanging from them his arms were gnarled and twisted, thick-muscled under

his jumper. A strong hard man, Erak thought, and much better friend than foe.

"You must be Red Matin," he said. "Rumor travels swift in the Society of Scholars, and Teedin of Nawk told me of you."

"Teedin I know." The smile still lingered on twisted lips. "But your disc, Erak the Gaunt."

Erak turned his head, showed the bruised, discolored right temple. "This I carry instead of my disc. Disc and staff were taken from me on the Avenue of Wines, where I was attacked. Is everyone here a recent arrival?"

Red Matin nodded, stroking the small beard on his chin. "All have come within the quarter hour, Scholar." He spoke the last word with just a shade of mockery, as if, indeed, Erak could lay only dubious claim to that title.

"In that case," Erak said slowly, "one of these four is an impostor!"

Booming laughter shook the timbers of the room, rolled from floor to ceiling and back again. "Ho, ho!" Red Matin roared. "But you are a brash one, Erak the Gaunt. As far as I can see you are the impostor—and a pretty poor one, too, with neither staff nor disc."

Erak could feel the blood rising to his head, making his temple pound savagely. He had not come all the way to Balore

to be called an impostor, not when the ships of space would blast down from the sky within the week. On the other hand, it would be pointless to anger the gnarled red-head until this thing could be proved one way or the other. "Do you know each of the four?" Erak demanded, and when Matin shook his head, Erak wheeled on the listeners. "What about you? Do you know each other? Is there anyone here who can call another his friend for anything but the past fifteen minutes and a cup of wine? Well?"

Red Matin waved his hand in front of Erak's face. "No, they don't know each other, and I don't know them. So what? The discs don't lie, nor the staffs. But they come from separate cities, these four, to join me here in Balore."

Erak looked at the four. The first was tall, not so tall as Erak himself, but thinner. A loose-jointed sack of skin and bones, held together, it seemed, by wires. In his hands he held a board with strings stretched across it, and when he scratched these with the fingers of one hand, they made music. He said, "I am Fidarik of Winton. I am a Scholar and my disc and staff prove it, and I think you will agree I am too mild a man to at-

tack you. If you are called Gaunt, as you say, then you would have to call me Gaunter." He laughed foolishly and strummed his lute. "Fidarik the Gaunter, I like that."

The second and third were two of a kind, a couple of youngsters. Bright-eyed, eager, probably drinking their first cups of wine this very day. They said nothing as Erak surveyed them, but Red Matin introduced the one with hair as Oren of Xandri and the chubby one with too much baby fat still around his hips as Hibart of Mund. Both could have been in the Society for no better reason than that they had grown bored with life in Xandri and Mund, two small towns to the south, as Erak remembered.

The fourth was a woman. She met Erak's gaze with coolly insolent eyes. A woman, not a girl, because to Erak there always had been a great difference. The while she measured and calculated with those cool eyes, she yet could entice. Certainly not overtly, but it was there—that aloof beckoning call of the woman who is aware of her beauty and of its power to sway strong men.

She was tall, her eyes would be on a level with his own mouth, Erak thought; supple of limb and strong, she met his stare coldly, her tunic falling straight and

shimmering from pointed up-thrust of breasts to where it met her boots at mid-thigh. Her hair was long and loose and very black.

"My name is Naria," she said, "and although I live here in Balore I have not met Red Matin until this day."

Erak knew that was not strange: the woman Scholars often worked alone, and there was no reason why she should have met Matin before this. But, which one? There were the four, and one of them had taken his staff and disc, was here now under false pretences. Not the troubador, who now hummed a meaningless little tune, not Fidarik. The youths? He doubted that. Naria of Balore? A woman striking him down and taking from him what she wanted while he lay helpless as a babe? He snorted, then laughed at his own arrogance.

One of them, but which?

Red Matin poured wine for all, and they drank. Said Matin, "Come, you'll have me believing it yet. You can join as a Student down on the Street of Armorers, but without the disc you are no Scholar. Right, Fidarik?"

The troubadour nodded, sang an off-color song about a Scholar and an inn-keeper's daughter, then looked, flushing, at Naria. But she laughed as heartily as

the rest. "If I'm to do a man's work, Fidarik, then I can hear a man's song. There probably are some lyrics I can teach you, besides."

Red Matin grunted his approval of the woman, poured more wine. Both the youths declined it, but the rest of them drank from tall flagons. By the Ritea, but Erak was thirsty! He drained his flagon and Matin poured again, filling it till some ran over. "You can stay awhile, Erak, and warm your bones or your innards, as you wish. But then you'll go."

It had been early morning when Erak had eaten the few remaining scraps of his salted meat, and now on an empty stomach the wine went to his head rapidly. How pleasant it was here by the fire, how beautiful was Naria, stretching languidly now like some great cat of another world, how nice the music of the troubadour as he sang of other times and other places . . .

Head awlirl, Erak put his flagon down unsteadily, said: "I am Erak the Gaunt, Scholar of Nawk Society, and I claim my right."

"You have no right to claim without your disc!" Red Matin got to his feet, jabbed a finger at Erak's chest with each word.

He too had had his wine. "I say you go."

"By the Ritea," cried Erak, "then you will have to make me."

Fidarik swayed back and forth, strumming his lute. "They fight. They fight—"

"Be quiet." This was Naria. "No one is going to fight."

Erak had other ideas. He stumbled forward, grabbed the throat of Matin's tunic. "I don't think I'll even need a knife for a little man like you."

Red Matin shook him off, pushed the hands away. "Little, am I?" he exploded. "Ho, but that's good, Erak. He calls me little! I am so broad across the shoulders I have to enter a space ship sideways, and—"

"Let's all sit down and eat before someone gets hurt," said Naria. "We can settle this in the morning, Matin: for all you know, Erak may really be a Scholar. You wouldn't want to kill him."

Erak wished he could see straight, but the room seemed to dance and leap with the flames within their fireplace. He had no real reason to fight this man, but the Scholars were a cocky breed, and once the thing got going . . . well, Matin would live to regret it. *If* Matin lived. But what was that he had said about a space ship? A space ship . . .

"Matin! Matin, did you say

you entered a space ship?"

"Yes. Sideways—my shoulders—"

"That's not what I mean. Just the fact that you entered. Tell me about it, Matin; tell me about them."

Matin held his sides and roared, drowning out the crackle of sap in the burning logs and the scratchy music of Fidarik's lute. Both the youths stood off in a corner, Hibart of the flabby hips looking a little green from his wine. Naria stood watching Matin and Erak jawing at each other. They did not see her at all.

Roared Matin: "So now you want to back down, eh? Talk instead. Don't tell me you've never seen a space ship?"

"What's strange about that?" Naria demanded. "Don't forget, Erak's from Nawk; his nearest spacefield would thus be here in Balore. You think those things come flying merrily all over Wuld?"

"Umm-mm," Matin grumbled. "But this—this claims to be a Scholar." He weaved about drunkenly for a time, expelled his breath in a great rush of air, lunged for Erak.

At another time Erak might have liked the gnarled dwarf. But now he sidestepped the rush, caught Matin's wild swing with one hand, swung the man

around, battered his jaw with an iron flat, Matin toppled and fell.

He got up roaring, but Naria stood there with a knife. "I said no fighting, Matin. I mean that." For a long moment Red Matin looked at her, looked too at the gleam of fire on her long blade. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder . . ." Abruptly he relaxed, sat down. "You are strong, Erak of Nawk—and perhaps I was somewhat pig-headed—but I think you know I do not believe your story. I like a good fight, Erak. Maybe some day soon . . ."

"I propose a truce until morning," Naria said, sheathing her knife. "We can take Erak with us to the School and have him lecture the Students. We'll soon know just how much of a Scholar he is."

"Ah," said Fidarik. "And if he turns out to be a dud we can leave him right there in the School. Perhaps one day he will become a Scholar."

Matin wagged his head, said quietly, "No, my friend. Erak the Gaunt has his chance to admit he's an impostor tonight. He has not admitted that." Matin smiled at Erak, rubbing his jaw, and Erak grinned back. Yes, he could like the gnarled dwarf, and it could be that the blow had taught him a lesson. But Matin said, "If this lecture proves con-

clusively he lies, I think we will kill him."

They supped on fowl—and more wine. Afterwards, Fidarik entertained them with his songs, lusty ballads of the Scholars. But soon Hihart of Mund cut him short, spoke in his high voice:

"I hear the women of Balore are famous for their dancing. Will you dance for us, Naria? It is still early and I would like to retire with pleasant thoughts."

Matin's laughter roared again. "Now, by the Ritea, this whelp is a poet at heart! But he is right, because the women of Balore—"

At first Erak thought Naria would refuse, and he was sorry. To mid-thigh black-tressed Naria wore heavy boots—he'd like to see the flash of white leg under them, the smooth flowing grace of her limbs there by the fire, the sleek animal in this woman. But hands on hips she stood, looking at Hihart, and the youth seemed ready to bolt for the farthest corner.

Naria smiled. "Why not? I'll dance—but not for you. Naria of Balore dances for a man, not a boy. I'll dance—"

Red Matin's chest expanded as the woman's glance raked the room.

"—for Erak the Gaunt of Nawk, who is probably more of a Scholar than us all."

"We'll see about that in the morning," growled Matin.

Naria smiled. "My boots, help me with them."

Red Matin smiled, jumped to his feet, but Erak reached the woman first. He undid the laces slowly, pulled until both of the long heavy boots came off, threw them into a corner.

Laughing, Naria skipped away from him into the center of the room. He had been wrong about those slim legs—not white. The firelight gleamed on them like burnished copper. Naria turned to Fidarik, "Can you play about the great sweep of stars that is the Milky Way—and of the man and woman who will reach them one day? If you can play of that, troubadour, then I will dance."

"I can play," Fidarik said hoarsely, and his fingers began to scratch across the lute. This time, however, the music was slow, soft, mellow; Fidarik might have been playing on heartstrings, not animal-gut.

Slowly at first, so slowly that Erak did not realize she had begun her dance, Naria began to whirl around the room. Her arms lifted high, yet not stiffly, reaching through the ceiling for the stars, beckoning. Her back arched gently, effortlessly. Her lips parted.

Naria danced.

Faster she whirled, and faster.

Her feet poised on air, leaped on air, seemed to scoff the floor, found the rhythm of Fidarik's lute and flashed it about the room, dropped it for a moment, but only for a moment, in the cup of Red Matin's rapt stare; carried it to Hibart and Oren in their corner, mocked them with it; gave it to Erak the Gaunt, bound him with it, swept him up and carried him along although he still stood by the bright fire.

The flashing slowed to a whirl, unbound Erak as a spring unwinds—then tied him all the tighter with one last impossible pirouette.

Narla stood near Erak, motionless, a thin film of sweat glistening on her upper lip. He grabbed her, pulled her to him, still part of the wild reckless dance, felt her struggling, heaving in his arms, pulling away.

She did not slap him as a woman might, merely to show she disapproved. She lashed out, backhanded, with a blow that caught him squarely on the mouth, crushing lips against teeth. Erak reeled back, wiping his bloody mouth.

"The dance is over," said Narla. "I am going to bed."

II

Sleep improved Red Matin's temper, and the promise of a

new spring in the bright early morning sunlight put a happy song on Fidarik's lips. For Narla, the dance and what followed might never have been—she had a friendly smile for Erak.

"Does our adventure begin to-day?" demanded Oren of Xandri.

Red Matin laughed. "At your age I was not yet a Student, let alone a member of the Society. But it may, lad, it may begin to-day at that. Depends on Erak of Nawk.

If he is indeed a Scholar, then we're ready to start. If not—" And Matin made a meaningful gesture by running a long forefinger the length of his throat.

The adventure, Erak knew from what old Teeding of Nawk had told him, would be what the Scholars had been waiting for. They had paid only lip service to the Rites for a long time, and while they knew the Idols by heart, these they laughed at in their private meeting places. But now, now under Red Matin of Balore, this small core would grow . . .

It wouldn't be easy, Erak knew that. You could free a subjugated people who knew and resented their bondage, but what did you do with a world unaware of the conqueror's yoke, unaware of the conqueror's identity, unaware, even, of the fact of conquest?

It was not a long way from the Avenue of Wines to the Street of Armorers, but almost at once Erak knew that something had changed the quiet city of Balore. Not eagerness, the city still lacked that, but the early morning traffic was too heavy, the crowds too noisy, the traders too busy with their wares.

Red Matin stopped an old man hurrying along beside them. "What's happening, fellow?" he demanded.

The man scowled. "You mean you don't know? It's a bother, that's what. A space ship came last night, two weeks ahead of schedule, that's what. I've had to alter my plans, get things ready for trade, cancel engagements. Those aliens—if they could drive space ships, you'd think they'd have enough sense to come when they're scheduled." He smiled, winked, knowingly. "But then, they're not very bright, eh? And you know the old Idol of the Market Place, my friend: 'have patience with the spacemen, they lack intelligence.' So I'll have patience, but it's a bother, that's what."

And he disappeared in the crowd.

Matin grinned without mirth. "That's what we have to fight. If you think low enough of the man who's enslaved you, you won't even realize you're a slave. He

gives you the Rites for your imagination, and they take up so much of your time that there isn't much curiosity left. And he gives you the Idols, like religion—only it isn't good, the way religion should be. Feel sorry for the spaceman, he isn't very bright. Treat him kindly, sure, and let him bleed you dry. Bab! Don't envy him, he lives on a dark, cold, poor world off in the sky somewhere. A planet of plunder, you mean—because he's given the Rites and the Idols to a hundred Galactic worlds!"

Narla shrugged. "We all know that. That's why we're here. But suppose we get on to the School, Matin. You still want to learn about Erak the Gaunt?"

And so do you, Narla, Erak thought grimly. The woman was an enigma. First she stopped Matin from fighting, defended Erak, then she turned on him like a fury. Of course, he had taken liberties, but that dance would have brought fire even to the blood of old Teedin. What was a man supposed to do? Perhaps you treated women like you treated the spacemen, who, as the Idols told you, weren't too bright. Except that they were bright, devilishly bright, bright enough to rule the startrails in their guise of simple plodding traders, bright enough to chase every other planetary race out of

space over the years and turn it back to feudalism with the Rites and the Idols . . .

"The Students look frightened," said Hihart of Xandri.

Entering the room behind him, Matin laughed. "Perhaps that is because I am a hard master. But then, if these whelps expect to be Scholars one day, they will need it."

"No, Matin. They look frightened. Really frightened."

"Don't tell me how they look!" Matin snorted. "I've seen them before, Hihart."

Erak had to agree with the flabby-hipped youth. The room was too silent. Too tense. Forty Students, at least that number, but not a sound.

Matin mounted the platform, scowled darkly at Fidarik as the troubadour strummed his lute, turned to his audience. He wasted no time with preambles. "We have with us Erak the Gaunt of Nawk who will speak to you this morning."

Someone stood up, said: "Are you all here?"

"What do you mean, are we all here?"

"All the Scholars who are with you, Red Matin. Are they all here?"

"I don't see what business that is of yours, Student. But yes . . . Who are you? I haven't seen you

around the city before. I—"

The man strode forward, reaching under his cloak. His hand emerged with an ugly, stub-snouted weapon. "If you're a Scholar, then you know what this is. It damages your nervous system, not your body itself. But it can kill you—quite unpleasantly. We call it a neuron gun, and it does the damndest things to you."

He waved the weapon. "Don't move. Don't any of you move."

Three other men came forward while Red Matin stood there cursing silently.

Erak found himself being searched. His sword and dagger were taken. "Amazing," one of the strangers mused. "Did you know that this race had atomic power not more than a thousand years ago? I think they had reached the other planets of their system, too. Hah, but give them the Rites and the Idols, and now these crude sticks are their weapons . . ."

Idly, Erak wondered why no one bothered to search Narla of Balore. He smiled and touched a hand to his bruised lips. Her sex really didn't matter—at least not when she was as angry as this.

"Who are you?" Hihart of Mund bawled, but Matin shook his head. "Don't ask the obvious,

lad. Who do you think they are?"

Hibart still vacillated between what the Rites and the Idols told him and what he had learned as a Scholar. "Specemen, yes . . . but what would they want with us? What—"

"Give me that!" cried Fidarik. One of the men was examining his lute. "Give me that, or—"

"Shut up," the man told him. "Is this thing a weapon?"

The one with the neuron gun laughed. He was a heavy man, darkly bronzed, about Matin's age, Erak guessed. "Don't be ridiculous, Chornot. He makes music with that. Let him have it—perhaps he'll need music on his long journey. Perhaps . . . I said give it back to him, Chornot!"

The man's voice was like a whip, and Chornot gave Fidarik back his lute, grumbling.

"So," said the heavy dark man, "we are now—" But at that moment Oren of Xandri leaped off the platform, ran for the exit. The heavy dark man shook his head sadly, adjusted something on his neuron gun, then pointed the weapon at Oren's back. Oren screamed once, horribly. He fell, lay writhing on the floor.

"Low intensity," said the heavy dark man. "It won't kill him. But it takes the nerve endings and twists, and it hurts."

"You should have killed him," said Chornot.

The leader shrugged. "You're impetuous, my friend. Too impetuous. You know that we want them alive. Shall we go?"

Red Matin smiled. "I think it's up to you to decide that. But what do you want with a few harmless Scholars . . ."

"Indeed, it is up to me. Now you, you look strong: carry him." He pointed to Oren, still writhing on the floor. Red Matin grumbled, lifted the youth to one shoulder like a water-bag.

They filed out between the rows of gaping Students. Fidarik strummed his lute once, thought better of it, trudged out silently. Erak did not like the way the man Chornot looked at Naria, but then, the woman's hips swayed just enough to be interesting. Now there was a ridiculous thought, with the Rites knew what ahead of them!

Erak had never seen a ground car, but he had read about them in old books which the Rites did not prescribe. Now they all crowded into the vehicle and soon, soundlessly, it whisked them out of Balore and toward the spacefield.

Through the window Erak could see the flat dirty expanse of the spacefield. Ahead, rising from the plain like a giant

needle, stood a space ship, gleaming in the early sunlight, pointing straight up into the sky. Long and long Erak watched it. You could read the forbidden literature and learn about space ships, yes—but unless you lived in a spacefield city like Balore you never saw one, and once seeing, all the words in all the books were as nothing. A space ship . . .

Their car stopped on a platform between four slim metal girders. Erak heard a loud clicking noise, and, purring softly, the platform climbed between the girders. Once, Erak looked down, knew that no building on all of Wuld stood this tall. He did not look again.

They stopped half-way up the side of the gargantuan needle of a space ship, and part of its hull slid back. The floor inside met the level of their platform exactly. Chernot did something with the controls and their car crept slowly within the space ship.

Fidarik began to laugh. "Martin, don't tell me your shoulders were too wide for this door!"

"So, I exaggerated." Martin's face seemed very pale. "They are taking us inside the ship and the ship is pointing up, which means it is ready to take off. They are taking us—somewhere."

After that, there was a silence. The car stopped in a wide hall-

way, and the dark heavy man motioned them out. He pointed. "You will find an apartment through that door. One large bedroom, one small. Food, a kitchen, a bath, everything you'll need for a long journey."

"How long?" demanded Martin hotly.

"Very long. We have some stops before we go—home. Any questions?"

No one spoke.

"Well, then, I am called Jewold. There will be a steward around from time to time. You want anything, ask for me."

Erak said, "I guess it would be pointless to ask why you're taking us."

"It would." Jewold laughed. "Oh, you'll be told. But the time is not now. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," Chernot sneered, "here's a pleasant thought for the journey. One of you is not a Scholar. One of you is a traitor, sent from this ship to find the Scholars. But which one—ah, there's the rub! Well, one of you, but which one?"

Jewold's dark face grew darker, and he yanked savagely at the collar of Chernot's jumper. "That wasn't necessary. It may cause trouble among them, serious trouble, and we want them intact. Also, our representative stays, of course. But now he may

he in for some trouble, if they find—"

"He? He, Jewold?" Chornot pulled away from the other man. "Don't jump to hasty conclusions. Don't make them jump. How do you know for sure it's a he? How can they know? One of them is a woman, Jewold."

"That's enough!" Jewold hissed. "That's too much. If you don't shut up—"

"If I don't—what, Jewold? You may run this ship. But I'm of the Council, don't you forget that." Chornot chuckled. "I even know who the traitor is. You don't. I also know I don't like him—or her. Pleasant, the way you can take care of two things at once. We get the Scholars, and I put—someone in a nasty hole with them. Let them find that someone, Jewold. I don't care. Let them kill him—or her."

Two leaping strides brought Red Matin to the man's side, placed Matin's big hands around his neck. "Now, by the Rites, you'll talk!" he roared. "Who?"

Chornot tried to speak, but gurgling came from his throat. Jewold sighed—regretfully, Erak thought—and turned his neuron gun over, clubbing Matin expertly with it across the base of the skull. Matin grunted and fell.

Jewold opened the door of their apartment and they went inside, Erak dragging Matin's

great bulk across the floor. For all his small size, the red-head was massive, a foreshortened giant.

Said Jewold, "I wouldn't advise you to heed too much what Chornot has said, but it's up to you. As for you, Chornot, some day you will go too far and kill yourself." He led his dazed companion from the room and the door clicked shut.

Fidarik tried it, but it was locked from the outside. It was a large room with five couches, and from it three doorways led to a bath, a kitchen and another room, smaller, where Naria could sleep. Now the woman came from the bath with a jug of water, spilled it in Red Matin's face.

He spluttered, shook his head, sat up. "Nice fellow, that Chornot," he said, rubbing his head.

"It was Jewold who hit you," Fidarik told him.

"Well, Jewold only did his duty. Chornot I would like to kill one day. As for the traitor—one of us. And Erak the Gaunt still has neither disc nor staff."

Erak laughed. "Don't be a fool, Matin. You're playing right into Chornot's hands—"

"Well, it can't be Fidarik. Fidarik knows too many ballads of Wuld."

Erak shook his head. "He'd know them if he were a good spy.

Matin. Part of his role, that's all."

"Hibert and Oren, then. They are too young. Too innocent."

"So what? Again, very good roles for a spy."

"Narla? A woman?"

Narla smiled. "The best spies in history, or so the old books say, have been women. We have one additional weapon, Matin, and it's a good one."

Matin ran a hand through his bristly red hair. "Surely not myself. I'd know if I were a spy."

"Of course you would," Erak told him. "But we wouldn't."

"I see what Erak means," said Narla. "Chornot wants us to fight among ourselves. But it won't do us any good, not when we don't even know where we're going or why. I'd say we should ignore all this spy and traitor stuff—"

"With him living among us?"

"Yes," Erak said. "It's the only way. Divided, we haven't a chance. But working together—well, let's see."

"I don't know—"

"Suppose we put it to a vote," Narla suggested. "All who want to forget there's a traitor among us, raise your hand."

Erak and Narla raised theirs, looked around the room. Oren said, "Whatever that neuron gun did to me, it doesn't hurt now. But it's quite a weapon, and

we'll need all our strength." He raised his hand.

"I don't feel like fighting," declared Fidarik. He brandished his lute high overhead. "You may consider this my hand."

Soon Hibart's hand went up. Everyone watched Red Matin's massive shoulders shrug. "Then that's what you want," he said. "You may count my hand as well. But it will be the hand that kills the traitor—after all this is over."

Five minutes later, the ship took off for the stars.

III

The days became an endless routine. Through their portholes they watched the changeless velvet backdrop of space, studded with stars still too far away to show relative motion. They ate and they slept and they talked, but after a time it became the same meaningless chatter. What do they want us for and will we ever see Wuld again and (Matin) when I get that traitor and (Fidarik) would you like music and (Hibert) please dance again for us Narla . . .

Wuld was a conquered world, but except for the Scholars, Wuld did not know it. Wuld once had atomic power and the secret of spaceflight, but now the Rites and the Idols had taken

them and given the horse, the ox-cart, the sword in return. The warp and woof of tradition and superstition kept the people in thralldom—without their knowing.

Only the Scholars knew. And so the conquerors, the masters, took half a dozen of them into space. Why? That was the key question, and for it Erak the Gaunt had no answer. Soon his thinking too became a tight little circle from which there seemed no avenue of escape.

Three or four times the steward came to their quarters with food piled high in his arms, a cocky youngster who wore his neuron gun carelessly on his belt. Aside from that, they had no contact with anything outside their rooms, and Erak almost found it hard to believe they journeyed through space.

No booming thunder of space-engines, but silence. No realization of the infinite sweep of distances; the changeless stars could have been painted on their portholes.

But one day a somber red star seemed brighter than the rest, and day by day Erak watched it grow in the port after that. His nerves tingled with excitement. The star became a tiny disc, a larger one, a glowing red ball throwing fingers of fire into the void. Seen in transit, the tiny

black dot of a planet was unimpressive, but soon it swept closer, became a sphere gray and ochre. One moment it stood off ahead of them in the void of space, the next, it was below them and they were hurtling down toward it.

They came down softly as a feather, landed in a jumble of rocky crags. Everything outside appeared red, somber red, twisted, distorted, convoluted. An old world, tired and worn and broken by too many billions of years.

"Don't tell me they live here?" Red Martin was incredulous at the idea.

Erak shrugged. "I don't think so. Remember, Jewold spoke of several stops before they went home. This could be one."

Said Fidarik, half-incoherently, "The winds of eternity must have marched across the face of this world before our sun was a star. By the Rites, but it is old. I wish I had a song to go with it." And then he went off into a corner of the room, mumbling to himself.

Erak watched through the port, saw the same framework of girders emerge from the side of the ship, saw the ground car ride it down and disappear across the tortuous, rocky landscape. After that—nothing but

the view of a world which seemed more dead than alive.

They sat at the port and watched, the five others, but Erak grew restless. He got up, paced about the room, went to the kitchen and nibbled half-heartedly on some food. Soon he found himself walking into the other bedroom, Naria's room.

He had not meant to look for anything. He was there because he had grown restless and his feet had carried him through the door. But propped against the wall in one corner he saw Naria's staff, and idly, he took the Scholar's stick in his hand. Black as jet, it had the Scholar's S at its top, but two-thirds of the way down Erak saw several small white marks.

At first they didn't mean anything, but Erak's thoughts brought him back to his long trip across the silent late winter lands to Balore. Once at night a wolf had crept close to his fire, attracted more by the human-scent than it had been repelled by the dying flames. Erak had beaten it off with his staff, but its strong teeth had fastened for a moment, had tugged . . .

Those white marks on Naria's staff could have been the imprint of teeth!

Then was it Naria who had crept up softly behind him that day in Balore, hit him with a

club, taken his staff and disc?

Naria the beautiful, who could make a man's blood leap when she danced . . . Naria, spy and traitor . . .

"What do you want in my room, Erak?"

He whirled around, felt his face redden, dropped the staff. "I—I grew bored. You tire of one room, a couple of portholes, an old red planet which looks like a picture—"

"What do you want?" She came closer, stood near enough for him to touch her if he reached out with his hand, a tall woman, regal, cool—yet mocking him.

Her eyes looked for a moment at the staff on the floor. "What did you find interesting on my Scholar's staff, Erak? What?"

He stepped back away from the woman, and she laughed. He said, "I don't know if I want to talk about it—"

"Go ahead, talk if you want." She came closer.

Erak frowned. He bent, picked up the staff, tapped his fingers against the little white marks. "How did this happen, Naria? Tell me that, but better make it good. Remember, you insisted I talk."

"How should I know?" She shrugged, smiling. "I've had my staff a long time. It's only wood, you know, black wood. Many

things might have caused that. But is this what you wanted, Erak? Is this all you wanted? Because I—I too grow bored."

"My staff could have been like that. A wolf—"

"I didn't know you had a staff, Erak. That's what hothered Martin, you know; no staff."

She came closer, her lips parted invitingly. Red lips, the lower one just a little too full to be perfect. They parted in a slight smile, seductive; revealed even white teeth.

"Damn you!" Erak swore. "You want me to forget all about this, don't you? You want me—but when I kissed you once, you didn't like that. You had no reason. Witch—"

Her arms went around behind his back, gripped his shoulders from behind. Her black hair tickled his cheek. Her lips brushed his, fitted away—

He pulled her to him all the way, kissed her long and savagely. Then he thrust her back. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Isn't it what you wanted?"

Answer a question with one of your own, thought Erak. Play the game right. Make him forget, because he has to forget. Witch . . . But by the Rites she knew how to kiss!

"I wanted to know about your staff," Erak persisted. "Did you

come behind me that day in Balore, strike—"

"Erak, Erak!" She shook her head, laughing. "We all agreed not to talk about that, because it would get us nowhere. Remember, just before we left Wuld? And it was your idea, Erak. Erak—"

She cupped his face in her hands, looked long into his eyes. "Is it so important? I danced for you once, Erak, remember? I could dance for you again—here, alone."

There was no way he could prove it, not really. His word against hers—and those marks could have been caused some other way. Any way. A hundred ways—

He said, "I'll close the door, and then you will dance for me."

She stood there, smiling, and Erak strode across the room. He reached the door, collided with Red Martin's squat figure, breathless now.

"Come to get you two, lad. Come to the port—"

Narla was laughing, a lilting sound, but she followed Erak out of the room. "Look," said Martin.

Outside, the ground car had returned. From it came two figures which could have been Chornot and Jewold, entering the ship on a lower level this time, through a portal too narrow for the car. With them were



three creatures, slothful, ungainly things which shuffled along slowly on four thick, shapeless legs. Things a deeper crimson than the weathered rocks around them.

"What kind of animals are they?" asked Hibart.

Erak shook his head. "No. They're not animals. Look again."

The man who might have been Jewold stood facing one of the creatures, looked like he was talking. Around the creature's red middle was a broad yellow band. Erak pointed. "See that? That's clothing. Those things are intelligent—"

"So," said Fidarik, "our human masters evidently have more than one slave world. And these red things—who knows? Maybe they're a form of Scholar too who learned the truth. Perhaps this world has its own Rites, its own Idols, I wonder if we'll ever know."

"We'll know," Red Matin promised grimly.

Soon after that they left the world of red rocks, and Erak found no opportunity to see Naria alone. The stars in their porthole seemed bunched closer together. Fidarik, who had read some of the forbidden books on astronomy, guessed that they were in a cluster, especially since

the white dots, the yellow ones, the blue and the orange showed relative motion after just a few hours.

Some they skirted perilously close and the flaming fingers licked out, beckoned, almost caressed. Red Matin fumed at their meaningless existence here in the apartment, with all of space outside waiting for them. Fidarik did not play so much on his lute; Oren and Hibart withdrew often, talking in whispers of their homes in Xandri and Mund.

Naria alone was cheerful. And Naria indeed had a reason, thought Erak, if she were approaching her home.

They landed again, briefly, on the planet of a blue sun. Its spaceport was a great circular area stretching to the horizon in all directions, but there was more activity here. Carts came, brought goods to trade, departed with new loads from the ship. From this height it looked like the hustling of tiny ants.

"By the Rites," swore Red Matin, "these are the worlds of space! I want to see them—not the four walls of this bedroom."

Fidarik grinned, strumming his lute for the first time in days. "And you will, Matin. They didn't take us from Wuld just to keep us here. Have patience."

"Bah! Patience is one thing I

have never had. We have work to do on Wuld—but meanwhile, meanwhile, there is all of space for us, the star-worlds . . .”

The car whisked out and returned even sooner this time, with a handful of sticklike creatures, tall and wraith-thin. Fidarik mumbled something about the possibilities for life being endless, and soon after that the ship thundered off into space again.

Planet of an orange star, slow ponderous, bumbling world of a blue-white super-giant, planet of eternal daylight with three suns in the sky, frozen ice-world so far from its primary that the sun was only a bright fleck against the black sky—on all these they landed, stayed only briefly. On some they traded, on others, as on Wuld, they did not—but always they stayed long enough to take some creatures away with them.

Drab dead world of a star that glowed feebly, that once had been a flashing flaming crimson, where the car went underground and came up with a dozen tiny mole-like things; small white planet of a small white star and big white furry things that hopped ridiculously on one thick leg; green-brown planet of a star like Wuld's own sun, far away across the galaxy . . .

“This almost could be another

Wuld,” mused Matin. “I would see—”

The cocky steward came in then with their food, neuron gun perched jauntily above his hip, and Erak hardly realized what was happening. Matin's great arm circled the scrawny neck, a muffled groan, legs kicking, arms flailing air—Matin let go and the steward fell in a heap. But Matin had his neuron gun.

He turned fiercely to his companions. “Now, who goes with me?”

No one said anything.

“But surely you don't want to stay here—forever?”

Erak said, “It won't be forever, Matin.”

“You speak as if you know—as indeed you would if you were the traitor among us. Are you?”

Erak shook his head decisively. “It's just a guess, but as Fidarik said, they didn't take us, or all the others, merely to travel through space with them. No, let's stay this thing out, Matin.”

The others nodded.

Matin waved the gun in his face. “Well, then you can if you want to. But not I. I go outside—now!”

Matin turned, an angry little figure with massive shoulders, stalked to the door which the steward had left open, passed through it, was gone.

"And now what do we do?" Fidarik wanted to know.

Erak shrugged, watched Hibart inspect the steward. "He isn't dead, Erak. Someone bring water."

Soon the steward sat up, groggily, said: "Where's the one with red hair?"

Narla looked at the others, and when Erak nodded, she told the youth what had happened. "The fool!" he said. "The fool—they'll leave him here, you know. I'll report now what has happened, but if somehow your companion is off the ship, they'll leave him."

Erak watched the steward go, closing the door behind him. Then they sat in silence, the five of them. It didn't seem the same without Red Matin. And when they got back to Wuld—if they got back to Wuld—they would need Matin.

Before long the door swung in. Chornot and Jewold entered their quarters. "See?" said Chornot. "See? You leave these barbarians alone too long, and they have to do something wild—"

Jewold frowned. "We didn't come here for that. Look, all of you, do you want your companion back?"

"Certainly. Of course we do," said Narla, and all of them nodded.

"Well, there's a city close by, and doubtlessly he'd go there.

You can look for him if you'd like."

"What?" cried Chornot. "And maybe lose more of them? We can't wait, Jewold. Let me remind you of that."

"I know it. But if they want to look, they may—just one of them. The big red-haired one was a sort of leader, and he'll be needed. We'll give them some little time." He reached into a pocket, came out with a small shining instrument. "Whoever goes, take this chronometer. When the dials are so—" he pointed, "—you must be back at this ship. No delay, not one moment, whether you have found the red-haired one or not. Now, who goes?"

Oren said, "Why not one of you, Jewold? You know the planet better, you could find him more readily—"

Jewold's bleak dark face flashed a brief smile. "No, this thing will be done my way. If I lose one more of you, well, that is unfortunate. But I won't risk leaving one of my own men here."

"I think you're crazy to do it at all," Chornot told him.

"Nevertheless, it will be done. Any questions?"

"Yes," Oren spoke again. "Why can't you wait until he's found, even if it takes some time?"

"Idiot!" Chornot barked. "Don't you know anything about astrogation? A little delay can be compensated for, but when you're thinking in terms of individual stellar motion, of the motion of this cluster, this swarm, of this arm of the galaxy, the galactic rotation itself . . . Bah, we'd be hopelessly lost. Even now, with this delay, we might be. I don't know—"

"You don't have to know," Jewold reminded him. "I captain this ship, Chornot. Now, who goes?"

Fidarik said, "If he hears my lute he will know me, and come."

"Sure," Narla laughed. "But what if you have to fight to get through to him? You'd be quite a warrior. The same goes for Oren and Hibart. But now I, although I am a woman—"

"Although nothing," Erak told her. "Where are you biding muscle on that figure?"

Narla blushed, and Erak continued: "As I see it, only one of us is suited to go. Don't forget, Natin may not want to come back at all. But I can force him, I can beat him if necessary. I will go."

Narla grumbled, Fidarik strummed a disconsolate chord or two, but no one disputed Erak's logic.

"So be it," Jewold declared. "When can you start?"

"Give me that chrono-thing," said Erak. "I can start now."

He found the mission to his liking at once, when Narla ran to him, flung her arms around his neck and kissed him as he stepped through the doorway with Jewold and Chornot.

Briefly, Fidarik's music was gay again, lilting—and then the door clicked shut.

Night on the green planet. Night and rain, hard driving sheets of it which the winds battered against Erak's body, drenching him. Jewold, Chornot and two others had taken him in their ground car to the edge of the city, then they had gone on their own mission. "Don't forget the time," Jewold had reminded him. "Watch that chronometer—"

The planet smelled like Wuld, like it and yet unlike. The damp earth was rich, steaming slightly in the rain—but the plant smells were too strong, too heady . . .

Erak hardly realized it at first, yet there was something intoxicating about it. Pungent, cloying, it made his head swim, made him giddy, took his feet and gave them a strange dance which he hardly could control.

City's edge. He found a street, entered upon it, walked a ways—staggered, hardly saw

the pastel buildings with their fantastic gingerbread architecture. "Matin!" he called, which was a foolish thing to do, because the natives—whatever the natives were—might resent him. But the cloying fragrance whispered, told him to do foolish things. "Matin! Matissima!"

Faces peering out of windows. He thought he saw them, couldn't be sure because the fragrance spun a web of impossible pictures before his eyes.

"Matissima!"

Silence. Only the driving rain. No one on the streets, only the wind which came in quiet little gusts and brought the fragrance to him, softly, secretly—the fragrance which told him to stay, and forget the ship, stay and be drunk forever with a wine that comes on the wind . . .

A face! There, at that window, street level. A face? One great soulful eye, a slit of a mouth. Green in the dim light behind it. That—a face? Blossoms sprouting where ears should have been.

Why was old Teedin of Nawk looking at him out of the rain? How could old Teedin be here, whispering of all his old friends, beckoning him, insisting . . .

"I'm coming, Teedin!"

Stop.

That isn't Teedin. Narla, shaking her pretty head, the long

black hair like a tent falling all around her, parting over up-thrust of breasts. Come back, Erak. Find Matin, but return. Return to me, Erak. My kisses.

But it was a long way back through the rain, didn't Narla know that? And Teedin might have some of the fair-haired, golden-limbed girls of Nawk with him . . .

Teedin? Where was Teedin? Narla pouted prettily in the rain, calling him back. But he did not see the old man of Nawk who had sent him originally to Balore to seek out Red Matin.

To seek Matin. Matin. That was his job, now. And what were these alien perfumes, anyway, against the fragrance of Narla's midnight hair?

Smells. Vile odors, sickly sweet. Stay, indeed. He'd need two plugs, one for each nostril, if he were to stay!

He walked more firmly now, saw the furtive faces at windows, not phantoms, but real, intent upon him. When he looked they darted back, timorously. He had nothing to fear in this city.

Ahead, a bulk—a sodden, wet mass, Matin!

"Hello, Erak. Erak?"

"Yes, Matin. Come on, we're going back to the ship."

"Don't you like it here? I told

you, Fidarik, these star-worlds—"

"I'm Erak, Erak. But we're going back, you and I. Now."

"Let go of me, Erak. By the Rites, leave me alone! If I choose to stay—"

"It's not what you choose," Erak told him, shaking his shoulders. "It's that perfume. Think of something else. Anything. Concentrate."

"The May Festival," Red Martin sang. "I will think of the May Festival, because it pleases me. All the beautiful girls of Balore would come, gathering garlands, and throw them at my feet. Yes—"

"It is May in Balore now," Erak told him, smiling. Indeed it might be, because enough time had elapsed since their journey began.

Time! Erak pulled the chronometer from his pocket, gazed at the luminous dial. All his time, almost gone. Jewold and Chornot would be back at the ship, waiting a final few moments. But now, again, the perfume bled him stay. Yet Naria too would be waiting, Naria with her kisses. Naria and her dance . . .

"I want to stay!" Martin roared.

Erak swung his fist savagely, caught the point of Martin's jaw with it. The squat figure

staggered, spun giddily, slumped. Erak caught it in his arms, heaved it up, draped it over his shoulder. By the Rites, but Martin was heavy, a giant in a dwarf's frame.

With his burden, Erak stalked back through the rain, through the streets, between their rows of gingerbread houses. Thrice the fragrance halted his legs, thrice he stopped, would have eased Martin to the ground, but each time some small part of his mind thought of Naria, dwelt on her beauty, called her, cried to her—and he could move again. Slowly, as in a dream. Slower still, a dream of a dream.

The City was behind him and he staggered across a vast wide plain. Ahead, the space ship loomed up in the rain, far and far away. The fragrance crept up from behind, stealthily . . .

"Naria, call me now! If ever you called anyone, call me now!"

Hands grabbed him, lifted Martin from his shoulder, put them both in a car. Forward it went, and then it lifted—and soon he saw the old hallway, and the door. Hands thrust him in, departed. The door closed. His head was pillowed on something soft and warm, and Naria's face swam down out of a haze. Was it wet with tears, or did the haze trick him? Was he here, back on the ship, and was Naria so glad

to see him that she cried, or did he still dream with the fragrance?

"Narla . . . ?"

IV

He sat up, slowly. "I'm all right now, I think."

"Well, you just rest a while, Erak. Matin has told us of that place of smells and compulsion. Erak, Erak—they almost left without you."

Erak got up again, this time rapidly. His head ached, and it spun. For a moment nausea swept over him in a wave, but it soon passed. He felt weak, dizzy—but he could stand.

"They were out there too!" he cried. "They—Chornot and Jew-old."

"Yes, they were," Narla agreed. "So what?"

"But it didn't touch them, this crazy perfume. They didn't say anything about it, did they?"

"No-o."

"Nor did they warn me. Then apparently it didn't trouble them at all. They didn't even know about it. Yet their kind has been here before."

Narla was frowning. "What are you driving at, Erak?"

"What do we know about them? How much? What have we actually seen of them?"

"Why—why, very little."

"Except," said Matin, entering from the other room, "except for the one of us who is a traitor." Erak suddenly realized he was in Narla's room.

"—and thank you, Erak of Nawk," Matin was saying, gruffly. "You saved my life out there. Saved me from something—well, my spine crawls when I think of it."

Erak nodded, almost curtly. He did not want to hurt Matin's feelings, and somehow he thought that now he could do that easily—but still, there was this thought gnawing at him, half-formed, and he wanted to play with it a little before it was filed away in his mind. "Anyway," he said, "if that fragrance bothered us, and if it didn't bother them—I think we can say they are different."

"Different?" demanded Narla.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean. Just different, that's all. We can't know until we get to wherever we're going. But then—then we'll see. Unless you know already, Narla."

"Eh?" said Matin. "What's that? Unless Narla knows? What do you mean by that?"

"Um-mm, nothing," Erak shrugged. It was still only a guess, all of it—still his word against Narla's, and he saw no

need to bring Matin into the thing. "I was just thinking," he told Matin now, "that one of us is a spy, Fidarik, Hibart, Oren—myself. That's all."

But his head was whirling. If Chornot and Jewold, if all the master-race were different—then what of Naria? Naria whose kisses sent his blood racing madly through him, Naria whose dance took all that was feminine and put it there before you within reach, then withdrew it, mocked you with it. What of Naria?

If that was where his logic sent him, did it not say as well that Naria too was not—human?

"—you should have seen her!" Matin had been talking for some time. "Fidarik told me all about it. Not a woman, not haughty, but just a girl, crying because she thought they would leave. Crying for you, Erak, or so Fidarik tells me. But how any woman in her right mind could cry for you with me out there . . ." He chuckled softly, crossed the room, went out and closed the door behind him.

"Is that true?" Erak asked—the woman.

She turned her head away. "Perhaps I was foolish."

"Kiss me now," said Erak. He took the girl in his arms, warm, vibrant, human. Human. He kissed her, slowly, thoroughly.

She felt human, reacted as would a woman. But by the Rites! You couldn't kiss a woman that way, trying to decide with part of your mind whether or not she were human . . .

He thrust her back and away from him. For a time she looked into his eyes, trying to read something there, Erak could sense that. Then, abruptly, she turned and walked into the other room, to join Matin and the others.

Day by day, Fidarik's music became gayer. But he sang no more of Wuld—his voice lifted to the stars instead. Even Matin, grim and surly most of the way, seemed to realize somehow that they neared journey's end.

The ship stopped no more at its galactic ports of call. That part of it was finished, was almost as if it had never been. And Wuld—what of Wuld, back half way across a galaxy, remote, a speck of dust following a tiny spark through the skies? It seemed almost as if they had spent their whole lives on the ship, had but one purpose, and that to reach the world of Jewold and of Chornot.

The homesickness was gone even from Hibart and Oren. With the others they watched the stars, myriad clusters of them now, sprinkled in wild pro-

fusion, spinning, flaming, flashing by.

And secretly Erak wondered if Naria was the most eager of all. For the rest this was all new and strange, but the woman perhaps had been here before, had fled among the stars of space, played among them by her birth-right. And now, was she going home?

One day, the view changed. Outside there was a blackness, with vague half-formed gleamings of light aswirl in its depths. Fidarik spoke quietly of great sprawling masses of faintly iridescent gas which obscured the stars.

Naria took Erak's hand and he half wanted to draw it away, but her fingers were cool and he liked their feel. "I danced once for you, Erak," she whispered, "of a man and a maid who would reach the shining bridge of the Milky Way on which the gods go. We have reached it, Erak, you and I. Remember my dance, Erak?"

By the gods of space—if space had gods—he remembered!

"But this I would have you do for me," said Naria. "When you see—what you will see, don't judge too harshly. Think of a waif, perhaps, taken from her home while the woman was still unborn in the girl, and shown the wonders—

Erak—of a galaxy. Think of her, and judge not harshly."

"You speak in riddles," he told her. "If you have anything to tell me, then say it. Otherwise—"

She withdrew her hand. "I have nothing to say, Erak."

One lone star swam in out of the blackness, white, splendid, aloof. Brighter it grew with each day, and when food was brought Erak noticed with a wry grin that the steward had been changed.

Red Matin's laughter roared. "The other whelp is afraid, and I can't say I blame him. Yet I was a fool. Yes, I admit it. Here, at journey's end, this is where we act. And by the Rites, it will be good to stretch my legs again—"

"Someone should have thought of that when you were born," Fidarik grinned.

Matin glanced down in mock horror at his gnarled legs. "Naria, tell him—Naria, don't you think I am beautiful?"

She smiled. "You are—different, Matin."

Erak wanted to say, "And how different are you, Naria?" The thought came more now, and he hardly tried to fight it down. How much of the women's beauty was a guise? Could it be stripped off, either by some physical or mental device, and what would be left? Of one thing he felt

fairly certain—Chornot and Jewold were not what they seemed. They had not warned him of the drugging fragrance on that far world because it had no effect on them.

And further, if they brought the Rites and the Idols to every world, if they yoked all the furry things with them, yoked the stick-creatures, yoked all the beings of a galaxy—what then were they? On Wuld they were men who came from the stars, simple men who by the Idols should be treated kindly. Could they assume this form at will? Were the Idols and the Rites the same the galaxy over, were the master-race stick-people on the stick-creature world, furry-things on the . . . It made his head swim, by the Rites!

They landed on a planet of the white star, and countless space ships of all sizes cluttered the field. This, then, was their destination, Chornot's home and Jewold's. Naria's?

No four girders this time, no lift, no ground car. A huge ramp extended down from the portal to the spacefield, and Erak watched the hundreds of men who had come home grinning, hugging each other, running down the ramp, shouting names of remembered places and remembered friends.

It was Chornot who came for them, and not Jewold. "I take over from here," he said curtly. "We are herding all the other-world creatures into one building. Tomorrow, probably, you will be brought before the Council."

"What for?" Red Martin demanded.

"What for? Why do you think we brought you here half way across the galaxy? You've waited this long and you will wait until tomorrow. Although, if I'd had my way, you of the red hair, you would not be here at all. No one told you to leave the ship that time on—well, no matter. At the bottom of the ramp you will find a gathering of the other creatures. Join it."

The spacefield, Erak saw as they went down, was not outside the city, but right in its middle. And on all sides the spires and towers rose to meet the sky, thin, graceful, dizzy with polished transparent highways weaving between the buildings. A robber planet, because they built all this with the spoils of Wuld and a hundred worlds like Wuld, while the people did not even know they were slaves.

Martin must have had the same idea. He muttered, "Thieves, pirates! We could have all this on Wuld . . ."

Oren and Hibart, Martin and

Fidarik, Naria and Erak, they reached the bottom of the ramp two by two. Off to one side milled the other-worldlings, furry-things and "stick-men, slotb-like animals with too-bright eyes, monkey-things which wore clothing, granite-thewed and whispy-limbed—the denizens of a score of galactic worlds.

"We—we don't belong here," stammered Oren. "Look, look at them! Not human, not even close to human—but we of Wuld and the master-race could have been cut from the same holt. So what are we doing with these creatures?"

"The lad has a point there," Martin observed. "Strange, is it not, that the human form should be duplicated here on this planet? But of course, for the nonce at least, we'd best follow orders."

Erak smiled. "I don't know," he said. "Don't be too sure that the human form is duplicated here." He turned quickly and looked at Naria, but she seemed as genuinely surprised by his statement as the others.

"What on Wuld do you mean by that, Erak?" she asked.

"That's just it. We're not on Wuld. Different world, different science, different everything. Don't be too sure that your eyes aren't playing tricks."

After that, they prodded him with questions, but Erak would say no more. It was only a hunch at best, and he half-feared he had carried a thin line of logic to such an extent that it no longer would support itself.

With the others, they were "herded" into a huge vehicle which would have made the original ground-car look like a conveyance for midgets. Martin said something about being able to stretch his legs inside, but he was wrong. By the time all the creatures piled in behind the driver, the interior was crowded. And then, the scores of creatures mouthing a score of impossible languages, they bounced away across the spacefield.

The way was lined with people of this world, and Erak could see and hear them quite clearly through the large open windows of their vehicle. Mostly, they made fun of the new arrivals, and Erak heard the voices which could have passed for catcalls:

"Look at them! Just look—"

"That furry thing with the soulful eyes. A travesty, that's what."

"Funny . . ."

"Mama, is this what you meant by bogey-men?"

"Observe the stick-things—"

"No, there, that one—that one! Pale white creatures, two

limbs on top, two on bottom. Rather ghastly. What? I count, um-mm, six of them, the one with the red-top, see? The one with the upthrust front, the one—"

This was impossible, thought Erak. Here they made fun of us, yet they looked enough like us to be our doubles! Yet that woman outside with the leering face could only have been talking of the people from Wuld. Of Erak and his companions.

The furry-thing seated in front of Erak chattered and whistled indignantly to its companion. The sounds were incomprehensible, yes—but there was no mistaking indignation in any form. It was as if the creature had said: "Those outside mirror us to the last detail, yet they ridicule us along with all these creatures . . ."

"—I don't understand," Narla was saying. "They're making fun of us, too. Yet they are human. I know, because I—"

"You what?" said Erak.

"I—nothing, Erak. I just know, that's all."

The ridicule had its effect within the bus. Immediately behind the driver a stick-thing and something which looked like a big spider with ten legs began to fight. The spider-creature scurried all over its foe and the stick-thing pumped away methodically with its limbs. Some-

thing screamed in anguish.

Two more figures joined the fray, and another. Screams and whistles filled the bus. A small monkey-creature jabbared at Narla, pulled her jumper, tore it down from one shoulder, revealing white flesh. Narla raked its face with her fingernails, and the thing wrapped small hairy arms around her neck.

Erak pulled it off and hurled it away as Narla cowered against his shoulder, then Erak was set upon by two more of the monkey-things. He had a brief view of Martin down on the floor, a thick-thewed thing on his chest, pounding at his face. Hibart and Oren were lost from view momentarily in 'a swirl of bodies, twisting, struggling. The din grew and Erak could not hear Narla although he knew she was screaming something.

Fidarik held his lute high and something reptilian tried to take it from him.

A voice, dimly, "Erak, Erak!" Narla . . .

Erak threw the monkey-things off, glimpsed something fastened to the driver's back, watched the man struggling. Their vehicle pitched wildly from side to side, tipped to the left, righted itself, skidded, struck something a grazing blow, careomed off.

Through the windows, Erak saw the crowd scattering madly

in all directions. They swerved again, grazed the side of a building, began to topple. Something big and white came up at them from the front, struck. Lights exploded fiercely inside Erak's skull . . .

V

Narla was stroking his forehead. "Erak, you are all right?"

He nodded. "I hope we don't make a habit of this, but what happened?"

"You couldn't blame them for rioting, not really, not after the long journey and then that ridicule. And Erak, I'm so—so confused. Because you were right, we were butt for some of those jibes, too. Erak—"

"What?"

"I don't understand, that's all. But it's not important, not now. Fidarik—"

Erak looked around. It was a small room, white and antiseptic, and he lay on a couch. Narla sat on the floor near him, crying softly now. Narla—crying.

"What of Fidarik?" he demanded.

"He's dying, Erak! He came half way across the galaxy—to die like this. Quickly, in one blinding crash. He's fading fast . . ."

Fidarik—dying? Fidarik, who brightened the streets of Balore

with his gay music, who sang of the times that were not and the times that one day might be. As a Scholar he might give his life to help Wuld, and that would be different. Martyrs, well, they were needed for any cause. But here, unknown and unwept for . . .

"They say that he won't live out the day, Erak. Internal injuries, and they just stand there watching. Watching! I think you are right, Erak—not human, I don't believe they know enough about human anatomy to save him. So instead they're watching him die . . ."

Erak got up, staggered for a moment under the weight of pain in his head. But it subsided, slowly, and he said, "Take me to Fidarik."

She led him, stiffly, through a door and thence across a wide foyer. Fidarik's room was much like his own. Small, white, antiseptic. Erak still found it hard to believe all this. On the journey they had seemed somehow apart from violence, even that night when the fragrance bid him stay on a strange faraway world. But suddenly, without warning, it had hit them.

Fidarik's eyes were bright with fever. Cold sweat lay on his face with a film that spoke of death. His lips were very dry.

"Erak—" his hand looked like a claw as it reached out from under the coverlet. Beside him lay his lute, twisted and broken, the strings loose.

"Erak—I am glad you came. Matin for all his charm is a bit of an oaf. Narla is a woman. Hibart and Oren, beardless youths. This is a man's game, Erak, and a subtle play. You, Erak. You are left for Wuld." He coughed and someone lowered a glass of water to his lips.

"I—haven't much time, Erak. Do you know what Wuld means in the old language which we don't speak—quite—any longer. Do you—know?"

Erak said that he did not.

"It just means—world. But we had an old name, when the glory of the stars stretched out before us, when we spanned the star-trails in great gleaming ships long and long ago. Do you—know—that name, Erak? It is Earth. Earth—a good name. A fine name. You must bring it back to Wuld with you—bring it—back with—the glory that was—Earth." His voice was a dying whisper. "Promise me that, Erak. Promise!"

Erak said thickly, "I promise."

"Good." Fidarik's hand stiffened. "Do you know that those fools broke—my lute . . ."

Fidarik's eyes blinked once, then shut.

Narla turned away as Erak felt the troubador's pulse. "He's dead," Erak said softly.

He put a hand clumsily on Narla's shoulder, noticed for the first time that Chornot stood there with Hibart, Oren, and Red Matin. "Well," said Chornot, "that's over and done with. The idiots—almost half of them were killed when the bus crashed."

"It was your fault," Narla told him bitterly. "You should have known the people here would react the way they did, should have guessed what would happen in the bus."

Chornot shrugged indifferently. "We never had so many aliens here on Gardifor at one time. Who could foresee? Unfortunately, the whole contingent of representatives from two worlds perished. Well, there are more."

Red Matin had stood, sulking, in a corner. Now he said, "Sure, what difference is it to you? A whole sky full of people to take, so what if a few die? You could always get more, whatever you want them for. You butcher!"

He tensed, ready to spring, but Chornot waved a neuron gun idly. "Careful. There are five of you left from Wuld; I should hate to kill you. Don't force me. Don't—"

Matin relaxed, but visibly, it had taken considerable effort. "All right," he said. "But let me

tell you something, Chornot. You shall die. This I, Matin, promise you."

Chornot laughed in his face, but Erak could see the stirrings of fear in the man's eyes. "Please don't be melodramatic," he said. "For now, the Council is ready to meet you on the top level of this building. The other creatures have already gathered, so, if you are ready, I can escort you."

"Bring on your damned Council!" Matin cried, stalking toward the door. Everyone followed him, slowly, with Chornot of Garlajor in the rear.

No one looked back at Fidarik.

It was a big, high-vaulted room, the ceiling lost in haze. On one side, sullen, silent, milled the creatures of Garlajor's galactic empire. Across a wide marble floor the men of Garlajor were seated, looking as human as any of Erak's companions. Still . . .

Someone stood up. "Chornot, make your report."

Chornot stepped forward, cleared his throat. "We have here representatives of the revolutionary movements on twoscore worlds, some of whom, unfortunately, have perished. The journey was uneventful, but for a few minor happenings." Chornot sat down.

"Good," the man told him. "That was quick and to the point.

Now—" he turned to the star-creatures. He was a big man, tall and gray, a little stooped at the shoulders—or, at least, he looked that way to Erak. "Now, you will all want to know why you are here."

Strange. The man spoke the language of Wuld. Yet it should be meaningless jargon to all those creatures standing, squatting, sitting around Erak. All seemed to understand. All listened intently, waited for his next words.

"We are the masters, none of you can doubt that—yet few of your fellows know it. Long ago—longer than your newly formulated histories on all the worlds go back—we conquered you.

"Indoctrination followed. None of your worlds know of conquest. They are lost in a labyrinth of mythology and legend, which is good. But you few—you know. The Students on B'rak, Anti-space League on Kor, World Federation of Sparilot, Historians on Ramnan Scholars of Wuld, Planetphiles on Zurgo—all of you suspected, delved into forbidden things, learned. We of Garlajor don't like enemies—and you certainly could be potential enemies.

"We want to be fair with you, although we could kill you. Our economy dictates galactic empire, and so be it. You can take part—which is why you are here.

You can return to your worlds as our emissaries, and riches will await you. Or, you can take the alternative—which is quick death."

Erak watched the rustlings of anger all around him. These creatures—all of them were like the Scholars of Wuld. All fought dogma and superstition and legend to find the truth across the length of a galaxy. Erak felt indignant, heard Matin cursing softly, knew that all the others, whatever their shape, felt the same.

"Wait," the gray haired man held up his hand, quieted them. "As I have said, riches await you should you join us. And more—for a chosen few."

Silence. Erak wondered what could come next—what could the man possibly say that would convince these rebels from twoscore worlds?

"Some of you look like your masters of Garlijor. And for those who do, a special place in the galactic hierarchy. You shall be our lieutenants, you few—with a hundred galactic worlds as your toys. Now what do you say?"

Mutterings again, in twoscore languages—but not angry. Confused, calculating, considering. Said Matin:

"That isn't half bad. We're the

ones he means, of course. We look enough like the people of Garlijor to be their twins. All the other creatures, as you can see, are alien. We can have the wealth of worlds, Erak—for Wuld. I think Fidarik would have liked that."

Erak snorted. "Yes? Then why didn't he name us by name if it is so obvious, Matin? Tell me that?"

"You answered it. Because it is so obvious—"

"I'll grant you that, although it isn't true. Why, then, don't all these others object?"

Matin stroked his red beard, long now with their voyaging. "Um-mm, that I do not know. Still, there is a reason somewhere—"

"One more question, Matin. How could all these creatures understand the language of Wuld?"

Matin scratched his head, said nothing. And Erak smiled his triumph. "I'll tell you why—because he isn't speaking the language of Wuld at all, Matin. He speaks his own tongue. Something, some science unknown to us, translates it for us. Telepathy is a word in the old books which could apply. Also, Matin, he isn't human. None of these masters are human. Each of the planetary creatures sees them as some of his own kind!

"A trick, Matin—so each of us will think he is the chosen one. Suggestion can play strange tricks on the mind—I think Fidarik spoke with you of hypnotism. Yes? It is a hoax, Matin—a hoax which can assure a galaxy in bondage for Garlijor!"

The gray haired man was speaking again. "There are those among you—one for each world—who were planted there to help. I can name them—" He reeled off a long list, concluded with "—Furniq of B'rak, Aja-lork of Ramnan, Naria of Wuld . . ."

"You!" Matin hissed. "Black-haired witch—you, the traitor!" His big strong hands were about her throat before Erak could stop him. Erak stood there, saw Naria's face go white, saw her gasping, struggling, clawing at Red Matin.

Then that was it. Naria—a tool for Garlijor. Naria—not human. Naria, whose kisses had held him, had created magic for him, whose dance . . . Like all of Garlijor's people, she looked human. He remembered the feel of her—she felt human. Woman—everything there is in woman which makes a man do wild things, impossible things. Naria . . .

Roughly, he pulled Matin away, held the man, sobbing, forced him off Naria. The woman's hands reached up to her

throat. Her voice was a creaking sound. "Erak, Erak—he would have killed me."

"Well, I stopped him," Erak said coldly. He turned away.

"Erak, please. There is so much you don't understand, and so much I am just beginning to understand. Erak—"

He strode forward, slowly, sought out Chornot among the seated men of Garlijor. *Fidarik* would want it *this* way, he thought. *For Fidarik . . .*

"Ah," said Chornot. "Then you are ready to come to terms, you of Wuld?"

Erak smiled. "The name of our planet is Earth, not Wuld. It is an old name and a good name—and now there is something I would know."

"And that?"

Still smiling, Erak reached out quickly with both arms, gripped Chornot's neck with one hand, pulled clear the neuron gun with the other. Oddly, one part of his mind realized that the suggestion covered the sense of touch—Chornot *felt* human. As bad Naria—

"What I want to know," Erak said softly, "is what you really look like."

"Crazy! Leave go—you'll be killed."

Angry murmurs among the men of Garlijor behind them.

"You tell your friends that if one of them moves—no, never mind, they can understand me." He waved the neuron gun. "If one of you moves, you'll be signing away Chornot's life! Now, hy the Rites, what do you look like? Can you control it?"

Dimly, Erak was aware of all the star-creatures watching. They seemed neutral, which was fortunate, for Erak couldn't look everywhere at once. "You see what I look like—" Chornot told him.

Erak shook the neuron gun in his face. "If you want to die looking like that, suit yourself. I'll count to three. One—"

"See for yourself. Please!"

"Two—can you control it? Can you? Th—"

Chornot seemed to writhe in his hands. What had been a man was an obscene horror, something from the slime-pit of a magician's nightmare of black magic. Erak could not describe it. He didn't try. He turned away and he felt ill.

"Look!" Erak cried. "Look at that—your master!"

Something stirred behind him and he saw Hihart and Oren running forward. He turned. A neuron gun was pointed at his back, Oren pushed him, clawed him away, dove at the man with the gun, received the blast squarely in the chest, folded up and tum-

bled to the floor, sighing once, a charred ruin. Erak's answering blast killed the thing of Garlilor—and the dead heap on the floor assumed Chornot's horrible new shape.

The star-creatures came forward in a wave, many of them falling. Curses, battle cries in twoscore languages! The subterfuge might have swayed them—but Garlilor could count them as allies never again, not after they had seen the horror of Chornot and the other.

Erak traded blasts with his neuron gun, felt his right arm go limp. He could see others of the star-creatures finding weapons, using them, turning the Council room into a chamber of carnage.

Red Matin scorned the guns, had picked up two stout clubs somewhere, swung them, one in each big hand, cracking skulls in all directions, roaring his rage across half a galaxy. With him fought stick-man and furry thing, all the creatures of the star-worlds—brothers—against the horror that could assume any shape and had to because of its own loathsome appearance.

Erak fell once, on a floor slippery with blood, tried to rise, saw the gun in front of him, heard the dull thud of Matin's club. Both the gun and the face

behind it disappeared, and Erak was up again, fighting toward the exit. Once he thought he saw Naria, struggling breast to breast with Chornot, who looked human again—Chornot who had escaped Erak's fury when Oren and the other man of Garlijor had perished. Then they disappeared behind a wall of struggling forms.

Erak fought through it, felt Matin beside him, heard the twin clubs swishing through air, the thud of contact. "That Chornot is mine!" Matin cried above the din. "A promise I made, Erak. He's mine!"

Only Matin couldn't keep his promise this time. They found Naria astride Chornot on the floor, her dagger rising and falling, coming up red each time. "Vile, filthy thing!" she was sobbing. "That I thought you and your kind were men, that you could fool me so—" They had to pull her off the man. Only he was a man no longer . . .

Naria between them, they fought their way through the room. Erak hardly remembered it afterwards. Aim the gun, fire it, cut and slash with Naria's dagger. They did not have many weapons, but the star-creatures outnumbered the things of Garlijor, fought with a fury that knew no bounds. Fire, cut and slash—

They were outside. They took the lift down to ground level—a dozen star-creatures with them. Everything had been too quick for any real alarm. Perhaps rumors were abroad. Perhaps some of the Council had sneaked from the room. That was all, and they could fight their way clear and to the spacefield.

The star-creatures parted, each kind to separate ships. "I can pilot!" Naria cried. "They took me from Wuld when I was a child, told me lies, taught me obscenities. I thought they were human. But find a ship, Erak, and I can get us away—"

They found one, on the edge of the spacefield, reached its portal. Jewold stood there, smiling strangely. Erak raised his gun.

"Don't, man of Wuld. All of us are not like Chornot. There are some that had to carry out orders but felt differently. Each world to its own destiny. Go, man of Wuld—damn you, go!"

Jewold walked away, not looking back. Matin raised his club, but Erak thrust the big arm down. "He means that, Matin. Come—"

Torn and bloody, Hibart joined them. "Oren is dead," he said. "Oren—dead . . ."

Erak smiled grimly. Oren was dead. Fidarik was dead. But a lot else had died this day.

Their ship hovered over the spacefield, and Erak watched three other ships, piloted by star-creatures looking for their star-trails home, circle and then dip away toward the horizon.

They found a gun up front, a big-snouted thing that Naria said spouted liquid fire. "This time of year," she told them, "all the ships of Garlijor are gathered here at the field. We can destroy them, and they can't build a ship in a little time, like you make a cart. It takes years—"

"By that time," Erak said, "we'll be long back on Wuld—on Earth, I mean. We have a ship and we can start to build defenses, just as they will be built on the other star-worlds. A slow thing, this revolt—but once the things of Garlijor were seen for what they were—"

"Their reign is at an end!" Martin finished jubilantly. "Let

them come to Wuld after years have passed. Let them. We can kill one, show the vile carcass . . ."

They criss-crossed the field with liquid fire, watched the ships fall in on themselves, smouldering. They left nothing but a burning ruin.

Naria held the dagger at his throat, but she was smiling. "Now, you stupid, foolish—will you listen to me? I learned, but it took time. Certainly I liked what they told me. They started when I was young; I thought they were human. Then they left me on Wuld to sow the seeds. What could I do? What can I do now to convince you?"

"You can put that knife down."

She did.

"Now you can shut up and let me kiss you."

She did—and he did.

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(Continued from page 41)

Come ye, my people, and speed him on his way. Come!"

With that, Year lowered his baton and stepped aside. Instantly, a score of Elquaan stepped ahead. They opened the door of the cage and two of them went inside and fastened a rope about the griaan's neck. The animal must have been in captivity for a long time, Cardwell thought, for it evidenced no fright of the Elquaan nor gave any sign of hostility. Meekly, it allowed itself to be led out of the cage. It was then tied to a pole a few feet away from the cage.

Year stepped ahead, raised his baton, and again addressed the griaan. "O thou divine one, thou hast sent into the world for us to hunt. O thou precious little divinity, we worship thee. We have been kind to thee. We have loved thee. Now we are about to send thee to thy father and mother. Pray hear our prayer.

"When thou comest to thy parents, pray speak well of us. Tell them of how kind we have been to thee, tell them of how deeply and reverently we have loved and worshipped thee. Tell them of our need for more and more griaan that we may hunt and have meat to eat. Our very lives depend on the goodness and generosity of thy father and mother. O thou precious divinity,

intercede for us. Humbly we beseech thee to heed our prayers."

Now Year stepped back and signalled with his baton. Several of the Elquaan came ahead and tied a rope to each of the griaan's hind legs. Then with ten men holding each rope the Elquaan pulled the beast's hind legs out from under him and the griaan fell, straddling the ground.

With the beast thus helpless, two long poles were passed about its neck, one underneath the griaan's throat, the other above. Now a great, joyous shout erupted from the watching Elquaan. They rushed forward, men, women and children, and they seized the ends of the poles and depressed them with the intention of strangling the griaan.

The beast began to snarl. It made savage, writhing attempts to free itself but it was too securely held. The feral shouting of the Elquaan as they milled about the helpless animal drowned out its fierce, choking snarls.

Beside Cardwell, Ada made a small, sick sound and lowered her eyes. Cardwell, too, felt his stomach heave a little at the unbridled cruelty and malignant joy evidenced in the gleeful shouting of the Elquaan as the griaan began to gasp its last.

"What's the matter, doll? I thought you said it would be fun?"

It was Naela's voice, coming from behind them. So intent had Ada and Cardwell been on the horrible sight before them that they had been unaware of Naela and Ysar having gone away from the beast. Now Cardwell and Ada whirled and saw the two Venusians standing behind them, mocking grins on their faces.

Ysar bowed. "You astound me, Miss Landers. I thought you were a huntress. The two griaan that you killed yesterday would indicate that you are a woman of great courage. Pray tell me. What is the difference in killing a griaan with an Evans rifle or killing the beast by strangling him between two long poles? Is not death the final result either way?"

"You wouldn't understand sportsmanship," said Ada through pale lips.

"Sportsmanship?" said Ysar. He seemed about to continue when an ear-shattering shout emitted from the Elquaan. Ysar said, "Well, the sacred griaan is dead. Now, after the blood has been drawn from him, I must consecrate it. Can you Earth people not see why strangling the beast is necessary? To my

ignorant people he is the incarnation of a god. Not a drop of his blood must be spilled. It is too precious. It will now be drawn from the griaan and after I have blessed it with my sacred wand, it will be sprinkled over the Naalem so that it might flourish and grow."

Cardwell said, "From your tone, Ysar, I get the impression that you don't believe in any of this?"

"Of course I don't," said Ysar, a little nettledly. "You forget I am educated. But it has been a custom for centuries to sacrifice the white griaan. It is my duty as lord of the Elquaan to officiate at the sacrifices. Must I believe in them just because I officiate."

Cardwell shrugged.

Ysar turned to his daughter. "Bring Cardwell and Miss Landers, Naela. Bring them to the inner circle so that they might observe the consecration of the sacred griaan's blood. I am positive they will find it most entertaining."

Ysar started forward. As at the beginning, the Elquaan fell aside, making a way for Ysar to pass through them to where the dead body of the griaan sprawled on the ground. Naela beckoned to Cardwell and Ada. Naela was smiling but Cardwell could not shake the feeling that there was

a faint malignance in the Venusian girl's grin.

Silently, Cardwell and Ada followed Nacla. As they progressed, the lane through the Elquaan closed behind them. Cardwell's throat constricted. He could feel the brush of the bolstered Evans against his thigh as he walked but the sensation was not very reassuring. The Elquaan were too many.

The blood had been drained from the dead griian and had been placed in a large earthen bowl. Several Elquaan were busy with the task of skinning the griian. The carcass steamed in the cool air. The stench from the warm flesh being laid bare was almost overwhelming to Cardwell. He experienced a great pity for Ada. He glanced at her and saw that she was determined to make the best of it. Her mouth was held stiffly and her nostrils were pinched in silent anger and grim purposeness.

Ysar circled the bowl that contained the blood of the griian three times and then stopped and turned so that he faced Cardwell and Ada. For a brief, mocking moment the Venusian's eyes locked with Cardwell's. A cunning insinuation seemed to glitter deep in Ysar's dark orbs.

Then Ysar poised his baton above the huge bowl and intoned loudly, "O thou blood of our be-

loved divine one, with the sacred wand of Waalmas I bless thee. When thou art spilled upon the Naalem, we beseech thee to nourish the Naalem-with thine own sweet life-force, that the Naalem may grow in abundance and bring wealth to my people."

Now Ysar began to circle the bowl again. Each time that Ysar's back was to Cardwell, the Venusian dipped his baton just above the surface of the blood and murmured something reverently in a low tone. Cardwell could not catch the words. Ten times Ysar circled the bowl, then he stopped and threw up his hands, brandishing the baton.

A gleeful shout broke from the Elquaan. They began to disperse, some running instantly to the liquor bowls to refresh themselves. Others gathered bundles of sticks and soon many fires were blazing. The dead griian was now being cut up and small pieces of its flesh were handed to the Elquaan who instantly ran and dropped the pieces into water-filled kettles over the fires.

Ysar approached Cardwell and Ada. The Venusian was smiling smugly as if from satisfaction over a job well done. Cardwell did not like the glint in Ysar's eyes but the man's tone was amiable enough when he spoke.

"The ritual is finished," Ysar

announced to Cardwell and Ada. "After my people have eaten the griaan, they will each take a tiny bowl of the sacred blood and go out and sprinkle it over the Naalem. Then there will be more feasting and drinking and dancing until late into the night. What do you think of our customs, Cardwell? Amusing, aren't they?"

"I suppose so," said Cardwell.

Ysar made a bored gesture. "Well, I must go and remove my sacred vestments. Come, Naela. Cardwell will be here when we return."

After the two had disappeared, Ada looked carefully about her and then she murmured to Cardwell, "I don't know if it means anything but the secret of making Quaa is supposed to be handed down from father to son or daughter among the lords of the Elquaan. It is claimed that no one else knows the secret. So, apparently, it is Ysar and Naela who are behind this Quaa business."

"That's what I figure, too," said Cardwell, stroking his chin. "But what I'd like to know is how they get the Quaa into the Naalem?" He stared narrowly at the large bowl containing the sacred griaan's blood. "I'd give anything to be able to examine that baton of Ysar's. I've got a hunch he slipped Quaa into that

blood under our very eyes. He's an arrogant and vain bozo. He probably got a lot of satisfaction out of pulling a stunt like that. I've got the feeling he's playing with us, Ada. I don't like it."

"I don't like it either," said the girl. "But we've got to find out how they put the Quaa into the Naalem. If there is Quaa in that griaan's blood, do you think that Ysar would have the audacity of contaminating the Naalem under our very eyes?"

"I wouldn't put anything past him," said Cardwell grimly. "He's pretty sure of himself. Well, I intend to find out. This afternoon when the Elquaan go out to sprinkle that blood over the Naalem I'm going right with them and then we'll see what we shall see . . ."

IX

That afternoon Cardwell and Ada followed the Elquaan out of their village. There seemed to be a complete exodus of the inhabitants. Men, women and children streamed out of the town in a long, weaving, gleeful and boisterous procession. The head of each family carried a small earthen bowl in which there was a tiny portion of the sacred griaan's blood.

When they reached the place where the Naalem grew, the pro-

cession broke up, each family apparently servicing their own designated plot. They dropped on their knees and with small, pointed sticks they stabbed tiny holes in the Naalem, then dipped the tip of the stick in the grinaan's blood and placed a drop of it in the miniscule hole made in the lichen.

Cardwell and Ada watched with a grim fascination. Was this how the Quaa was inoculated in the Naalem? Had there been Quaa concealed in that ornate baton of Year's and had he surreptitiously dropped the Quaa into the blood while circling that huge howl those ten times? Was this the thing that IPI was searching so desperately for?

These were the questions pin-wheeling madly about in Cardwell's mind when he heard the footsteps approaching behind him. He whirled, right hand going to the handle of his Evans, and saw that it was Year and his daughter who had come up. They were both dressed again in the long, ubiquitous robes of most Venusians. Year glanced pointedly at Cardwell's hand on his gun and the Venusian smiled amusedly.

"You seem on edge, Cardwell," said Year softly. "Has the ritual of the sacred grinaan unnerved you that much?"

Cardwell took his hand away. This was the first that he had seen of Year and Nacla since the conclusion of the ceremony. Though he had not mentioned it to Ada, Cardwell had considered the absence of the two as disturbingly ominous.

"We have had a most interesting day," Cardwell said politely.

The smile suddenly chilled on Year's face. "Have you found what you were looking for?"

"If you mean entertainment, the answer is yes."

"I do not mean entertainment," said Year stiffly, the smile dead on his face now. "I am speaking about Quaa!"

He said it almost viciously, an ugly wrath swirling in his eyes. Cardwell felt a small gelid prickle on the back of his neck. He had been correct in his suppositions. The true reason for his and Ada's presence here in the territory of the Elquaan was already known to Year. Still Cardwell tried to pretend ignorance.

"Quaa?" he asked politely. "What do you mean by Quaa?"

"You know very well what I mean," snapped Year.

"Quaa?" said Cardwell again, wrinkling his brow. "Is it something good to eat?"

Year growled a Venusian oath. His face suffused with wrath. He took a step forward and

raised his hand as if to slap Cardwell across the mouth. Cardwell's hand dropped instantly to the handle of his Evans.

"Look, chum," he said to Ysar. "I'm not one of your ignorant Elquaan that you can slap around at will. Drop back or I'll blast a hole in your belly!"

"If any blasting is going to be done around here, hud, I'm going to do it!"

The words were uttered behind Cardwell. He heard Ada's startled gasp and then Cardwell whirled and found himself looking full into the ugly, hungry muzzle of the big Evans pistol in Paul Hastings' hand. Hastings had stepped out from behind a ledge where he must have been concealed all the while. Cardwell felt his throat constrict. For an instant a heedless impulse to yank out his pistol and have a try at it seized him but the competent and lethal thrust of the weapon in Hastings' grip quickly deterred Cardwell.

"Is this how you can afford imported Earth liquor?" he asked Hastings.

"That's right, hud," said Hastings blandly. "Now be a good boy and forget about that Evans at your hip and no one will get hurt—for now."

Cardwell heard Ysar come up behind him and remove the

Evans from its holster. Out of the corner of his eyes, Cardwell saw Nacla similarly disarming Ada. A sick feeling hit Cardwell in the stomach but it quickly passed and in its stead came a savage, simmering anger.

Still he would not admit to his purpose here. "What is this?" he asked Ysar wrathfully. "We came here to the territory of the Elquaan peacefully. We received permission to hunt the grinan. Is not the word of an Elquaan worth anything?"

Ysar slowly and deliberately shifted the Evans pistol he now held to his left hand. He came ahead, raised his right hand and brought the palm of it smacking hard across the side of Cardwell's face.

"That is for your insolence," Ysar snarled. "That is to teach you that I can slap whoever I please!"

Cardwell's fists clenched. He took a menacing step ahead but Hastings said quietly:

"Easy, hud!"

Cardwell checked the angry impulse. He forced himself to forget his stinging face. His eyes glared at Ysar.

"Will you explain the meaning of this? Will you tell me what this—this Quaa thing is all about?"

Ysar's lips curled in ire and contempt. "Do you really con-

sider me to be that stupid, Cardwell? Do you really believe that I do not know that you and Miss Landers are agents of the IPI? Since you have such a low opinion of my intelligence and capabilities, I believe it is time that you be shown what I have accomplished and also that you be informed of what I intend to accomplish." His wide features demonstrated a jeering smile. "After all, that is what you came to find out, is it not? I do not have the heart to disappoint you. Come, Cardwell."

Ysar and Nacla led the way with Hastings, Evans pistol held purposefully in his hand, bringing up the rear. It was a twisting, tortuous way through enormous, weird upheavals of rock that Ysar led. Finally, they arrived at the mouth of an immense cave. Two Venusians, holding Evans rifles, were on guard at the entrance. They snapped stiffly to attention as Ysar came up but he gave no indication that he so much as noticed them. He passed into the cave.

The way was lighted with atomlights suspended from the ceiling. The passing of the party was marked by the weird, horribly elongated flickering of their shadows on the smooth stone walls of the cave.

From ahead came the faint throb of machinery and the sound of it sent a prescient chill down the back of Cardwell's neck. He was beginning to understand the implications of the matter, though the details were not yet crystal clear in his mind. But he could grasp the general pattern of it and with a little conjecturing he could picture the final, horrible result that left him weak and sick with helplessness.

They turned a bend in the cave and ahead of him Cardwell saw it. Ysar stepped aside to give the two IPI agents a better view. The Venusian bowed while a vain, proud smile touched his mouth.

"Do you see, Earthling?" he asked mockingly of Cardwell. "Now will you insist that Venusian scientists know nothing of machinery? That, Cardwell, is a most wonderful machine. With it I shall conquer not only Venus and Earth but possibly the universe. Is that not true, Hastings?"

"I can't see how you can fail, Ysar," came the renegade Earthman's reply.

In Cardwell's ears there was the whining hum of turbines and generators. He could make nothing out of this fantastic arrangement of covered vats and large tubes and an intricate profusion of piping, all of which seemed to

concentrate on and empty into a small, sealed chamber in which there was a door.

He glanced helplessly at Ada and turned up the palms of his hands in bafflement. The girl's face was tense and white. Cardwell gathered that she probably knew more about this machinery than he did but he doubted if it was any too clear to her.

Ysaar laughed. "If you are puzzled, Cardwell, why don't you ask questions? I shall be most happy to oblige with answers. After all, you aren't going anywhere with this information."

The bland threat of it left Cardwell slightly shaken. "Is that a weapon?" he asked.

"Indeed! A most wonderful weapon!" Ysaar seemed as joyous and gleeful as a child with a marvelous new toy.

"What does it do?" asked Cardwell. He was giving only half his attention to the conversation. His mind was busily weighing all the odds and possibilities but they all seemed very depressing and hopeless.

"It transforms Quaa from a white powder into a form of radiant energy which can be projected into the atmosphere of a planet. Now do you understand, Cardwell?"

"You dirty pig!" snarled Cardwell.

Ysaar

do understand? For years I've known that the secret of Quaa would one day make me master of the universe, Cardwell, but how was I to apply my knowledge of Quaa? I tried it in the Panaceum because it was most easy to do and also to see if I could get away with it. I succeeded. Then I considered injecting Quaa in all edible things exported from Venus but that would never achieve my ultimate purpose of ruling the universe. Like Panaceum, Earth people would stop using contaminated items from Venus once Quaa began having its effect. So I had to find another way.

"I pondered many possibilities, Cardwell. Finally, after many failures, I hit upon the solution. What if Quaa could in some manner be projected into the atmosphere of a planet? Then all of that planet's inhabitants would become helpless idiots. What an easy and bloodless conquest! Is that not so?"

The impending horror of it left Cardwell shaken but with a great effort he concealed his perturbation. His voice was low and calm. "I can't see any satisfaction in that, Ysaar. What joy would there be in ruling a universe of idiots?"

A spasm of vicious rage crossed the Venusian's face.

"The only idiots in my astral empire would be the Earth people. These are the ones I hate above all else. These are the people I am going to reduce to idiocy." He drew a deep breath and went on more calmly. "Are you so stupid that you do not understand yet, Cardwell? All I must do to achieve my great conquests is to use my Quaa machine on Earth. Once the inhabitants of Earth are reduced to idiocy, don't you feel that the mere threat of the same fate will cause all the other planets to capitulate without resistance?" He drew himself up proudly. "Do you not think now that I am a great man, Cardwell?"

"I still think you're a pig," said Cardwell through his teeth. He rather expected another blow in the face but Ysar only laughed and that was more ominous than a display of wrath. Cardwell nodded at the huge machine. "How do you expect to use that thing? You can't make me believe that you can project Quaa across space and into Earth's atmosphere from Venus?"

Ysar smiled smugly. "Have you never heard of space ships, Cardwell? All I have to do is mount the machine and several replicas in a number of space ships and Earth and the universe will soon all be mine!"

Cardwell shook his head. "I don't believe it can be done. I don't care how clever your machine is I don't believe Quaa can be projected into an atmosphere."

"You doubt it?" asked Ysar with a sneer. "After seeing that Elquaan that Hastings killed, do you still doubt it? Observe that small chamber over there, Cardwell. In that chamber I have simulated the atmosphere of Earth. Oh, I have planned and executed this most carefully, Cardwell. I have used that chamber and my machine on several Elquaan. The one you saw was one of my experiments. I did not kill them immediately because I wanted to ascertain the permanence of the effect of radiant Quaa on them. This particular subject managed to wander off and that is how you found him.

"However, you are probably still unconvinced so I am going to demonstrate my machine to you personally. The radiant Quaa works on the Elquaan. Now I must ascertain if it works on Earth people. You and Miss Landers will be my first subjects!"

Ysar snapped his fingers. "You will place Miss Landers in the chamber, Naela!"

Naela poked the barrel of her Evans pistol into the small of Ada's back. "Come on, doll. Let's

go into the chamber. The process is really quite painless. The Quaa affects only the brain. Soon you will be living in a pleasant world where you will have no worries and everything delights you. Isn't that nice, doll?"

Naela pushed hard on her weapon. White-faced, Ada yielded to the pressure and began walking slowly toward the small door that opened into the sealed chamber. She threw a mute look over her shoulder at Cardwell, then her shoulders squared with resignation and she marched stiffly ahead.

Panic clawed at Cardwell's throat and with an effort he forced himself to sound casual. "I think you've overrated the stupidity of Earth people and especially IPI, Ysar," he said quietly. "We have been in communication with Inspector Holt of IPI ever since we left Valmaa. Before we left the village, we radioed to Holt for help. You did not fool us with that baton or sacred wand of Walmaas, Ysar. A plane full of IPI agents should have landed at the village not more than ten minutes ago. If I were you, I'd give myself up, Ysar."

"You lie," Ysar spat. He raised a hand and struck Cardwell across the mouth. Cardwell took the blow and grinned. "You and

Miss Landers had no radio with you. You lie!"

Out of the corner of his eye Cardwell saw that Naela and Ada had come to a halt in front of the chamber. Naela pressed a button and the door of the chamber slowly opened but Naela made no move to force Ada inside. Naela's narrow-eyed attention was riveted on the three men.

"If I showed you the transmitter, would you believe me then?" Cardwell asked Ysar.

Cardwell's apparent lack of panic and anxiety obviously disturbed Ysar. He threw a silent query at Hastings and the renegade Earthman shrugged in bewilderment. Ysar's lips tightened.

"I suppose you are going to tell me that the transmitter is hidden at your camp. Oh, no, Cardwell, you are not leaving this cave. We will not succumb to any crude trick like that. I had your camp searched thoroughly while you and Miss Landers were hunting yesterday. You have no transmitter there."

"I know," said Cardwell easily. "You're holding the transmitter in your hand, Ysar!"

Ysar almost jumped in surprise. He stared wide-eyed at the blue Evans pistol in his fingers.

"Why don't you take the grip apart?" said Cardwell, his heart

beginning to pound. "Remove those two screws there at the bottom. A tiny radio transmitter can then be slid out. Go on, Year. Remove the screws. Then you'll see if I am trying to trick you."

Year shook his head in indecision. "I do not believe," he muttered. "I do not comprehend."

Cardwell glanced at Hastings who stood beside him. "I'm just going to take my pocket knife out, Hastings, so that Year can remove those screws." Slowly, carefully, his heart racing, Cardwell took his knife from his pocket and tossed it to Year. "There you are, Year. Remove the screws."

"All right, Cardwell," Year said, an ugly undertone in his voice. "But if you have lied to me and are just playing for time, it will go hard for you. I promise you that!"

Year fitted the tip of a knife blade in the notch of a screw. His entire attention seemed to be devoted to what he was doing. Cardwell glanced at Hastings. The pistol in Hastings' hand still pointed at Cardwell but the renegade Earthman's absorption in Year was quite evident.

Cardwell inhaled deeply and then struck. He was between Hastings and Year and first of all Cardwell swung out with the

edge of his hand, knocking Hastings' arm aside. Hastings shouted with alarm and pain. The Evans pistol almost fell from his fingers and by the time he had recovered, Cardwell had caught Year and had flung the Venusian at Hastings. Hastings had begun to fire and could not stop. The bolt took Year in the chest. A horrible, agonized shriek tore out of Year's throat and at its height it was terminated abruptly. Year, dead already, went crashing into Hastings and the two of them went down in a heap on the floor.

The Evans had fallen from Year's grip. Cardwell scooped up the weapon and came around with it just as Hastings had freed himself from beneath the dead weight of Year's body. Cardwell fired but Hastings, with a prodigious leap sprang aside and the bolt blistered stone on the opposite wall.

Hastings darted behind a generator. Cardwell fired again and again he missed but the bolt struck metal and bent and twisted it out of shape. From his shelter, Hastings tried a shot, the bolt shrieking past Cardwell's head and he hastily dived behind a turbine.

Hastings fired another bolt and a small pipe shattered and a thin blue haze began to curl upward. Cardwell tried another

shot at the generator but he only succeeded in knocking something out of kilter. The generator began to whine hesitantly and its speed began to diminish. Hastings still crouched behind its shelter and Cardwell knew he could never penetrate the thickness of the machine with the bolts from the Evans.

Suddenly, another weapon opened up on the generator from across the way. Hastings emitted a squeal of fright and came darting out, his Evans spitting blue, hissing bolts. One of the bolts smashed into the turbine and the stench of scorched metal rose tauntingly into Cardwell's nostrils. Then he caught Hastings with his own Evans.

The bolt smashed Hastings back against a slowly revolving wheel. A bit of Hastings' clothing caught in the wheel and suddenly he was inexorably in the clutch of the wheel. He was not yet dead and his cries rose to a shrill, excruciating pitch. Cardwell stepped ahead and through the sweat dripping down over his eyes he aimed the Evans carefully and one bolt silenced Hastings. The wheel carried him high and then down and ground his body to pulp but the agony had already terminated for Paul Hastings.

It came to Cardwell that while he was finishing Hastings there

had been more spitting and hissing of Evanses and, remembering the two armed guards at the mouth of the cave, he faced around fearfully. His surmise about the guards was correct but their menace no longer existed. They were both stretched out on the floor of the cave and, glancing over by the sealed chamber, Cardwell saw Ada standing there, Krohnite fumes still curling out of the muzzle of the pistol in her hand.

He ran hurriedly over to her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"Where's Nacla?"

Ada nodded at the closed door of the chamber. "I threw her in there. I never thought that the judo they taught us at IPI training school would ever come in handy but, believe me, Cardwell, I was thankful I had learned it. I took the gun from her and knocked her out and threw her in the chamber for safe-keeping. I didn't have time to coddle her. I flushed Hastings for you and just then the two guards came up." She drew a deep breath. "Well, we'd better let Nacla out."

Ada pressed a button and the door slowly opened. She would have gone right in after the Venusian girl but Cardwell, his heart suddenly chill, reached out and stopped Ada. Nacla sat on the floor in the middle of the

chamber, a wide, vacant smile on her face.

"Quaa!" the cry was torn hoarsely out of Ada's throat.

Cardwell's lips were stiff. "Don't feel sorry for it. While Nacla was in there and with all that shooting going on, the switch or controls must have been thrown on." He sighed. "It's for the best, Ada. Remember what you told me about the lords of the Elquaan and their children being the only ones who knew the secret of Quaa? Well, Year is dead and you can bet that Nacla will never remember . . ."

In the city of Valmaa, Cardwell sat at a table in a low Venusian dive, drinking Buumal. From overhead came the roar of rockets as a space liner took off for Earth. Bitterly, Cardwell raised his glass of Buumal and muttered:

"Happy voyage, Ada."

"Were you speaking to me, Cardwell?"

Cardwell's head flung up abruptly.

"Ada!" he said. "I—I thought you were shipping out for Earth!"

"You take a lot of things for granted, don't you?"

Suddenly a vast shame for himself came over Cardwell. He rubbed a hand over the beard

stubble on his chin. He knew his breath reeked of Buumal.

"What about that fellow you were supposed to marry back on Earth?" he asked.

Ada sighed. "I wrote him a letter. That was the most difficult letter I've ever written. I told him that the man I really love has a lot of faults. He's bitter and he's exiled on Venus for the rest of his life and he drinks too much, but when you're really in love, what can you do about it?"

Cardwell could not believe his ears. He was suddenly so happy inside his eyes began to sting. "Ada," he said. "You don't mean it, Ada."

"I mean it all right."

"But—hut don't you realize? I can't ever leave Venus. I can't ever leave this stinking, dismal planet. If only I could take you back to Earth, Ada!"

Her eyes narrowed. "You sound like you don't want me, Cardwell. Are you trying to back out of it?"

"Oh, no, Ada. No!"

He rose to his feet and looked down at his glass of Buumal. Somehow, he no longer had a yearning for the liquor. He took the glass and slowly emptied it on the floor. Ada saw and smiled again. She rose and linked her arm with his and together they started for the door.

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Figure 10.10

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 23 turn. Using Google Maps/Google Earth, you can see the I-5/I-15 Interchange.
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